

Anastasia

by firerwolf

Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2013-09-12 03:41:37

Updated: 2015-12-07 23:46:10

Packaged: 2016-04-27 03:27:42

Rating: T

Chapters: 13

Words: 38,140

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Stories of Anastasia Novara's life from her childhood, her career as a soldier, and her joining Crimson team. Rated team for serious mature themes.

1. Anastasia

Author's note: So quick explanation, this is a new series that's a collection of stories about my Spartan IV, Anastasia Novara. This story is rated T because of some serious sections of these stories. I don't own anything from Halo. Read and comment, please. I really do appreciate it and like feedback.

Anastasia

The wind rushed over the field that constituted a firing range. The smell of gun powder filled Anastasia's nose and stood at the table that was set up. She stared down at the pistol on the table. She reached down and took the weapon in her hand. It fit perfectly in her hand, or maybe she'd just spent so much of her life with a gun in her hand that she'd just gotten used to it.

Anastasia raised the gun, took aim, and fired. She emptied the clip into the target. She kept the gun raised, still looking at the human shaped target before her. The gun slowly lowered to hang limply at her side. She wasn't really thinking about the target or the gun. Her mind had been restless for the past few months as the date grew closer and closer.

"Wish I could shoot like you," a voice to her left said. Anastasia raised her gun and pointed it at the voice. The man didn't say anything, didn't even flinch. "You seem a bit more on edge than usual, Ana. What's on your mind?"

Anastasia didn't lower the weapon right away. She stared at the man for a couple seconds before she slowly lowered the weapon. "Nothing that's your business, Ted." She switched on the safety and placed it

on the table. "What do you want?"

"What, I'm not allowed to come and talk to a beautiful woman?" Ted smiled at her as he moved a bit closer. "Come on, Ana, give me a chance. We can make this work."

"No we can't," Anastasia snapped. "It's over, Ted, just get used to it." She started to take apart the weapon and inspect it. She'd always found that cleaning her gun calmer her, helped her keep her thoughts focused and organized.

"Wow, did you get another tattoo?" Ted moved before Anastasia could react. He pushed up her sleeve where her newest tattoo was. She took a step away from him and looked to the man. Ted's mouth hung open in shock. "Is that a UNSC logo? What is wrong with you, Ana?" Ted's voice fell to a whispered hiss. "What if your dad saw this? You know what he would do."

"Of course I know, but he doesn't control me." Anastasia put the gun back together and holstered it on her waist. "In two weeks he will never be able to control me again." Ted furrowed his brow and frowned but Anastasia could tell he didn't understand. "I'm not like you, Ted. I don't do this to make my dad happy. I do this because when I turn eighteen I'm joining the marines."

Ted looked shocked by the news. "You're joining the enemy?" he nearly shouted.

"Keep your voice down before someone hears you." Anastasia looked around to be sure that no one had heard him. "If my dad found out you know what he would do. And they aren't the enemy."

"What are you talking about, Ana? Of course they're the enemy." Ted took a step back from her. "How can you not see that with everything you know?"

"Because everything I know tells me they aren't the enemy, the Covenant is. They are out there, destroying worlds and killing innocent people. You're just blind to that because of the lies you've been fed."

"My dad says all that stuff about the Covenant is fake. He says they're using it to try to distract us so they can crush our forces." Ted moved over to a fence behind the table, opposite the targets.

"They're real, Ted, I've seen them. The scar on my shoulder isn't from a dog, it's from one of the alien species." Anastasia's eyes unfocused as she remembered the attack. "I was three, about to turn four, when they attacked. It was ugly, like a screwed up bird or something. It probably would have eaten me if an ODST hadn't put a bullet through its brain. They burned my world and we ran. That's why we're here on the planet, because ours is gone."

"Why did you never tell me? Why hasn't your dad told anyone?" Ted asked.

"Because my dad told me to be quiet about it, but I don't give a shit about what he wants me to do any more." Anastasia reached back and pulled the hair tie, allowing her long hair to fall free. If she left

it pulled back for too long it felt like it tugged at her scalp and made her head hurt. It made it harder to think and made her mad, or maybe that was just the thoughts of her father that had her blood boiling. "My father is so obsessed with his stupid conspiracy theories he doesn't care. He would see our species burned from the universe before he'd ever give up his pointless hatred for the military."

"Ana, I just don't understand. You'd be turning against your family?" Ted moved to stand beside her. "I don't want to fight you, Anastasia."

"My home is not a family, it's a dictatorship," Anastasia countered as she turned toward him. "If you don't want to fight me then don't. You're not an animal, Ted, you're a person. You can make choices for yourself. Chose not to follow them blindly." Ted looked away from her and looked to the ground. She knew he'd never a real away from the insurrection. He was obedient to his father who wanted him to one day help lead the rebellion. "If that's your choice." Anastasia turned and walked away from him, heading toward the paths that led to the supply sheds to put away her weapon.

Anastasia didn't return home right away. She dropped off her gun and headed out into the forest. There was a small grotto that only she knew about, her secret place. She liked to sit in the silence and just let it calm her. She stayed there for a couple hours before she finally made her way home.

When she reached her home she found her father waiting in the living room for her. She stopped in the entry way, waiting. He stared at her from his seat and slowly stood up. "Anastasia, you and I have things to discuss."

Ted hit the dusty ground, grunting at the impact. Anastasia stood over him, fists clenched and ready to hit him again. "I can't believe I trusted you? Did you even try not to go blabbing it to your father?"

"Ana, please, it's not like that. Ted sat up but didn't dare stand back up.

"Stop calling me that. You aren't my friend you traitor!" Anastasia took a step toward him. "You probably have me up without a fight, you coward. This is what you and all of the rebellion are. You're selfish cowards. You hide in the shadows and harm the innocent because you don't think your lives are good enough. Well all our lives suck but not all of us are hurting people that are innocent." She reached down and grabbed the collar of his shirt. Anastasia pulled him up so he could see her face closer. She pointed to the bruise on her cheek that was red and had started to blacken a bit. "This, what happened, is on you. You know my father, you know what he was going to do, but you still ratted me out. This is your fault and I hope you're proud of yourself."

She released him and stood up. "I'm leaving, and I'm not coming back. If you want to stay here and be their blind sheep then go ahead. But know that I'll be ready, gun in hand, to stop you when you take action. Even if I have to kill you to stop you." She left him on the ground as she grabbed her bag. She was sure she'd find somewhere to stay, anywhere that she could spend the next two weeks until she was

old enough to I list then everything would be fine. She'd join up and finally she'd be free of all of it. She wouldn't have to worry about her father, the bruises would fade, she wouldn't have to hide her hatred for the rebellion, and she'd finally have a purpose that felt honorable. For now though she'd focus on finding a place to spend the night.

2. Eridanus II

Eridanus II

Anastasia sat at the kitchen, coloring away with her crayons. She was intently focused on her picture, busying herself while her mother washed the dishes. Anastasia was a bit proud of her picture. She thought it looked a lot like the logo she was copying. Coloring was always the thing her mother fell back on when she needed Anastasia to be busied.

The picture was suddenly pulled out from under her crayon and Anastasia looked up to see her mother. Anastasia let out a cry of distress as her mother started to rip the picture apart. "What are you thinking, Anastasia. If your father saw this..." Her mother shook her head. "Drawing UNSC symbols," she muttered as she moved across the room and threw the scraps away.

Anastasia jumped out of her seat and ran to the trash and tried to get her picture back. Her mother grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the trash. "Stop that, the woman admonished. "You're going to a time out." Anastasia was pulled over to the corner. "Now stand here until I tell you otherwise." Anastasia's shoulders slumped and she turned to face the corner and wait until her mother told her she didn't have to.

Anastasia wasn't sure how long she'd been standing in the corner when the front door opened. She didn't have to look to know that it was her father coming home. The steps were heavier and she could hear his boots. Anastasia tensed and waited to find out if he would notice her. "What did you do?" Her father's voice was deep and angry.

Anastasia didn't look away from the wall. "I drew a bird," she answered honestly. "Mom got upset and I was put in time out."

Anastasia could hear her father leave the room. There was shouting from the other room and Anastasia hoped her father wouldn't get mad at her mother. She couldn't hear anything from her which hopefully wasn't a bad sign. She could hear her father ranting about the UNSC and she knew she'd be standing in the corner for a while. Her father would rant for a long time about the UNSC. She didn't really understand much about it but he apparently cared a lot about it. He would always talk about her brother, who she'd never met. He always said the UNSC had done something to him and that was why he died. She didn't know what to think, just went along to avoid his anger.

A sound grew in the distance and Anastasia turned away from the wall, as though able to turn toward the source. It seemed to come from everywhere around her and bounced off the wall. Anastasia could hear her father talking but it was too muffled for her to understand. The

notice grew louder and Anastasia felt a fear, though she didn't know why. Her parents moved into the kitchen and her father moved toward a window.

"I should have known they would do something like this. They probably are planning some sort of attack on us or putting us under military rule. I have to find Tranor. We need to gather and prepare to defend ourselves." Her father moved to the back door and exited the house.

"Stay there, Ana. I'm going to see if Mrs. Smith needs help." Her mother moved out of the house as well to go check on their elderly neighbor. The old woman lived alone and Anastasia's mother often went to go check on her after bad weather or events like it since Mrs. Smith didn't have anyone else. Anastasia didn't mind, it meant she was alone, and could find out what was going on.

Anastasia tried to look out the kitchen window but she wasn't tall enough to see anything. She decided to chance being caught and moved into the living room. She looked out the front window in amazement. In the sky hung great battle ships. They moved a bit out of orbit, facing away from the planet. She didn't understand why her father thought they were attacking. A trio of Pelicans rumbled over her house and she felt it shake the ground under her. He transports sped across the sky toward the main city not far away. Anastasia watched them, fascinated. She'd never seen anything like it and it was impressive to her.

Her wonder was suddenly replaced with terror as a bright light hit the side of one of the frigates in the sky and there were momentary bursts of fire before the vacuum of space shifted it out. A ship so in-human appeared in the sky, making a close pass to the planet. It was purple and sleek, looking so natural but unnatural at the same time, Anastasia could see little dots falling down from the larger ship. They covered the sky like dust particle illuminated by a beam of sunlight. The dots dropped town toward the planet and some were growing larger. There was an odd sound that Anastasia had never heard before and a purple craft, about the same size as a Pelican moved down her street.

The odd craft stopped in the center of the street a few houses down and the sides of it opened up. The figures that dropped out were not human, that was for sure. Some of them were bulky, with large hands and a large alike on their backs while the others were thin and looked like some kind of bird. Anastasia panicked, not sure what to do. She ran back into the kitchen and back to her corner. Her mother would return and she'd know what to do.

Anastasia fought to ignore the primal desire to run away, get away from the strange things she'd seen in the street. The front door opened and Anastasia waited for her mother to come into the room. She didn't want to look disobedient. Instead she heard a deep voice way something in a language she'd never heard. Anastasia knew that something was wrong. She looked around the room and tried to figure out what she should do. She finally turned to the cabinets and moved into one of them. She shut the cabinet door behind her and huddled up as best she could.

There were heavy steps on the tile floor of the kitchen. Anastasia cracked the door open and peeked out. She could see a long muscular

leg that seemed to have two knees. There was sleek blue armor on the creature's leg and two large toes. Anastasia looked up the invader's body. It was tall, taller than any human Anastasia had ever seen. Its hand had four fingers and gripped a large blue gun. The creature spoke, its voice deep and its words unintelligible. What caught Anastasia's eyes was the creature's mouth which was split into four parts. There was something creepy about the way the parts of the thing's mouth moved. It gestured and the smaller creatures entered the room. They weren't exactly short, all of the creatures were much taller than Anastasia.

The larger creature moved on but two of the medium sized creature, the one that looked like a bird, stayed in the room. Anastasia could see their backs facing her. They seemed to be talking in high pitched voices and seemed to be distracted. The instinct to get out of the room was so great Anastasia couldn't deny it any longer. She opened the cabinet door slowly and when it was open Anastasia made a run for it. She made it across the room and could hear the screeching shouts of the creatures. She'd made it into the living room before claws grabbed her shoulder and teeth suddenly sank into her shoulder.

The events that followed were a blur to Anastasia. She knew the creature was trying to eat her but the creature's head exploded into blood. Things blurred and someone came to her aid. She didn't remember much about the person, only the bird that she focused on. The eagle that hovered over her, the same one she'd drawn earlier, painted onto the soldier's chest plate.

The next thing she remembered the soldier was holding her. She could feel that they were leaving and she was sitting in the lap of the soldier. She reached out and her hand touched the eagle on the soldier's armor. The marines hand moved over hers gently. "It's going to be fine, kid."

Anastasia looked up and was surprised by the ODS helmet. She looked around them and could see at least five ODS in the pelican. There were a few other survivors and Anastasia could see her mother sitting across from her. The woman was staring at the ground, blind to all things around her. Anastasia turned back to the image of the eagle and shifted in the soldier's arms so her face was against the image.

"You like the eagle?" The ODS asked. "Well the eagle's here to protect you. Wrap its ads around you and keep you safe," he assured her.

"And you're in luck," another ODS spoke up. "We're warmer than other eagles. The pods we come down in warm us up nicely." She felt the second soldier place a hand on her knee soothingly.

The next thing she remembered she was in an infirmary. Her shoulder was bandaged and things were busy around her. She didn't know where her family was, only that they weren't there. She sat in her bed, alone for a long time. Medics came in, checked stats, and then left. The first person to talk to her was the ODS that had saved her.

"So how are you doing, kid?" The soldier asked. Anastasia just shrugged a bit. She didn't really know how she was doing. She didn't know where her family was, her home had been attacked, and she had been hurt. "Well I'm glad to see you made it. I was worried." The man

hesitated for a moment and then pulled out a small cloth. "You like the eagle, right?" Anastasia nodded in response. "Well take this. Keep it and remember that the UNSC is protecting you, keeping you safe."

Anastasia took the cloth and looked down at the embroidered UNSC eagle. She ran her fingers over it and looked to the soldier. "Thank you."

The ODSST smiled at her. "No problem kid." He reached over and ruffled her hair a bit. "Stay strong." Anastasia nodded again and the ODSST left her to get some rest. She curled up on her side and clutched the cloth to her chest as she went to sleep.

It would be some time until her family would visit her. Her father only seemed more upset than ever, muttering about it all being the UNSC trying to turn his daughter against him. Her mother was silent, still distant and not really looking at Anastasia. Their visit wasn't long and she slept for a long time until she was fully recovered at which point she went into cryo with the others for the trip to Reach.

Anastasia stared down at the cloth in her hand. Her finger moved over the embroidered image. "What's that?" Anastasia looked back at Evelyn when she spoke.

Anastasia frowned at the woman and clutched the cloth in her hand. "It's nothing, just an old keepsake. Nothing important."

"Well that's an obvious lie," Evelyn said as she moved over to her own bed. "But I won't pry."

"Good, I'd hate to have to hit you for being nosy." Anastasia lay down on her bed and held the cloth to her chest as she settled in to sleep.

3. Wolves

Wolves

Anastasia sat in silence on her bunk, quietly reading, back against the wall, supported by the pillow she'd put there to make herself more comfortable, and book held just close enough to block out the world around her. She was fully engaged in the words on the page, escaping the gray metal box of the barracks to the world laid out on the page by a skilled author. This book was one of her favorites and she'd read it several times already, loving it every time. When Anastasia had been a kid her father had forbid her from reading the books, so of course she'd read them all. She'd even at one point owned them all in paper but her father had found them. He'd made her watch as he burned each one before punishing her for the defiance. Now that she was older though she owned them again, and just to spite him she owned them in paper.

The books had always given her a safe place away from reality. She loved the tails of Lords and Kings, the twisted motives of the characters, and the web of lies. She'd made a particular bond with one character that she had related to easily as a child. The character had a brother with a bad temper, she'd been just a tool to

him for most of her life, and she eventually found her own strength. Anastasia had dreamed as a child of following that lead and becoming strong like the woman in the book and be able to stand up to the things in her life. She used to dream of dragons, of burning the things she hated, but that was years ago and she had learned better. Harsh reality had destroyed those dreams but still Anastasia had immortalized that old dream, that lesson to be strong, in a tattoo of a dragon on her ankle.

She had just started a new chapter when one of the other occupants in the room shouted. Anastasia lowered her book and glared at the source of the voice. "Hey, I'm trying to read," she shouted at the men.

The larger of the two men turned toward her. "You can go back to reading when Shadow's done cursing me out. He's almost finished losing all his money." The two men were sitting on their bunks playing cards on a table between them.

"I don't care," Anastasia snapped. "Keep your mouths shut before I break your jaw." She turned her attention back to her book and tried to ignore the two men and the string of curses as they continued to play.

She'd just started getting into the chapter when the door to the barracks opened and two men stepped in. Anastasia tore her gaze from her book as she realized one was their CO. The other man was unfamiliar and she frowned as she realized who he must be. "All right, Mutts, we've got out new teammate," their CO announced.

Anastasia studied the new soldier and frowned, not happy with him. He looked to be in his early twenties, younger than Anastasia, younger than anyone on the squad probably. He looked inexperienced and she wondered if he was fresh out of boot. He had light green eyes and his blond hair was recently shaved. There were no visible scars and he had a confident look on his face that annoyed Anastasia.

"Oh, so we got a new pup," Shadow joked and he grinned at the new soldier. Shadow was a fairly well tested soldier, having been with the squad for almost a year. His black hair needed to be cut but he'd put it off until their squad leader ordered him to. His dark brown eyes stared intently at the new soldier as though trying to see through him. "Hey Gray, how about double or nothing? Who dies first, Rookie or Hot Pocket."

Gray glanced toward the new soldier and then to Rookie who had been minding his own business, cleaning his boots, until he'd been mentioned. Gray scratched at the stubble on his chin as he considered the bet. He was the oldest member of the squad at the age of thirty-one but despite his name his hair was still a dirty blond. He'd made jokes of the stress of their job making him go gray but so far there was no indication it was actually happening. There was a jagged scar from the hinge of his jaw to the space between his ear and his eye. Gray had been in the military long enough that he had fought rebels before humanity even knew there was intelligent life bent on killing them. "Sure, why not. I say Rookie goes first. Hot Pocket might have a grace period before he goes."

"Naw," Shadow said looking over to the new soldier. "Look at Hot Pocket, he's a kid. The Covenant will eat him alive." Anastasia

unconsciously scowled at the comment. She glanced over to Hot Pocket who's confident look was gone. Rookie was indifferent, having grown accustomed to the taunting.

"That's enough," their CO snapped. Alpha, as they called him, stood tall and imposing, every bit the leader he was supposed to be. His brown hair was cut short to the prefect length, his ice blue eyes held at firm gaze that was imposing but not too stern, and he was well built like a proper ODST should. "Get settled on a cot," Alpha instructed Hot Pocket. "I'll go check what orders we have." With that Alpha moved out of the room.

Hot Pocket moved over to a cot and sat down, making himself comfortable. Anastasia returned to her book, half listening to the conversation between the two newest members of the team. "But why am I Hot Pocket if I'm a rookie?" the new soldier asked. "What's the difference?"

"You're Hot Pocket because you'll cook in your pod like a microwave meal," Shadow answered. "Your pod will roast you just right so the Covenant will be too busy eating you and we'll be able to save the day."

Hot Pocket turned to Rookie but Anastasia couldn't see his face from where she was lying. Rookie looked unsure, not positive he could give Hot Pocket tips or if that was breaking the unspoken code of the squad. "The pod is unforgiving," was Rookie's response.

"So is it true what you guys are called? I heard some people talking about you guys and what you do. Is it true?" There was an edge of excitement to Hot Pocket's voice which annoyed Anastasia.

"Not Exactly," Gray answered. "They call us Hell Wolves but really we're just Wolves. Shadow Wolf, Gray Wolf, and Fire Wolf. But the rumors about what we do are true. We drop into places being attacked by Covenant to push them back and allow evacuations."

"Can I ask something?" Hot Pocket didn't wait for an answer. "Why wolves? Why not something like a phoenix or griffon? Wolves are just so normal."

"Because phoenix and griffons are myths, lies, while wolves are real," Anastasia spoke up. "We are real, mortal people. We don't pretend to be some animal of legend. We are wolves."

"That and the story is that three of the first members of the squad had wolf tattoos," Shadow added. "Why don't you show him what I mean, Fire?"

Anastasia shut her book, realizing she wasn't going to get any reading done. "Bite me," she responded as she put the book away. It was true that the nomination of the wolf as their name had come from them having tattoos of wolves, which had been completely by chance, but that was long ago and she didn't like to look back on the past. She also wasn't too fond of showing off her tattoos. Each one meant something to her and she wasn't willing to answer the questions that came with people seeing them. The one of her back was a wolf head that, after she'd become an ODST, she'd surrounded in fire like the ODST skull. She had originally gotten it for the same book series that had given her the dragon tattoo. In the series there were wolves

that some of the characters owned, they protected them from bad things or when they were upset. Anastasia knew there was no wolf to save her from the things in her life so she'd gotten the wolf's head to remind herself that she had to be her own wolf, protect herself. It had been her first tattoo and was still her favorite.

"I would if Alpha wouldn't get jealous," Shadow replied. Anastasia stood up and clenched her fists. That was crossing a line and Shadow was well aware that Anastasia didn't like to be crossed. He put up his hand to ward off her attacking him. "All right, I'm backing down."

"Let that be a lesson, Hot Pocket. Don't mess with Fire or you'll get burned," Gray warned. He grinned and chuckled at his own bad joke.

Anastasia was about to respond when Alpha moved into the room. "Get suited up. The Covenant are in system and we're being dropped in. Move it, marines." The Wolves snapped to action, moving through the ship. They made their way to the lockers and changed into their armor, securing everything in place. Anastasia double checked that her gear was in place and followed Shadow, who always made sure he was first to get to the pods. Anastasia grabbed grenades, a DMR, and a pistol. She stored them away in her pod and the marines took their place. The doors shut and Anastasia heard her pod seal, securing her in her cocoon of metal. In here it was quiet and she was alone and she let herself relax against the padding in the pod looking to the red light. When it turned green they'd fall and all Hell would break loose.

Alpha's voice broke the quiet. "The Covenant are expected to reach the planet fires so it will be a hot drop. We're heading to a major city to maximize how many civilians we can assist. ETA two minutes." He paused for just a second. "May the odds be ever in your favor." It was the traditional last words of the Wolves before a drop. Someone always said it until the new leader caught on and started to use it. Anastasia couldn't remember where it had come from or who had started it, it just felt like they'd always said it.

Anastasia didn't count, knowing that counting would only make it worse. The light turned green and there was no time to prepare. Suddenly she was weightless and then there was a force pushing up on her as she fell. The force few as her pod gained speed and she could feel the heat seeping in. Her team was unusual as they didn't listen to music as they dropped like most other ODST squads. It wasn't that they had always dropped in silence but the current group couldn't agree on a song so they'd settled for none. Anastasia braced herself for the pod to slow her down. The chute opened and her thrusters activated, jerking her violently. She relaxed a tiny bit, knowing the most dangerous part was over.

"Shit," she heard cursed over the radio. The voice belonged to Alpha and they knew what it meant. He didn't say another word, accepting his undeniable fate like a soldier. Anastasia looked down to where she could see his pod speeding toward the planet, pulling far ahead of the rest of them. Flames licked over the outside of the pod and she could see the metal turning red as it heated. Alpha tried to keep quiet but when the heat started to burn through, burn him inside the metal, he screamed. There was a particular sort of scream that came from burning alive in a drop pod, the kind of scream that stayed with

you. Each soldier screamed just a bit different depending on their level of panic, pain, and fear. Alpha's scream was all pain, no panic or fear to it, just pain. It wasn't as bad as the panicked screams of some ODS that Anastasia had heard over the years but she knew it would stay with her. She listened until the heat melted away the electronics in Alpha's pod and the signal died.

Anastasia's pod landed in the middle of a road, cracking the asphalt in a wide circle. Anastasia hit the release on her door and it was forcefully jettisoned, hitting the ground with a loud thud. She moved out of her pod, grabbing her weapons with a practiced ease of years of drops. She moved off over the broken street, heading to the nav marker on her HUD where they were to meet up. She met up with a small group of Grunts on her way but they were easy kills with her pistol, killed before they could even raise their plasma pistols. She arrived at the marker and found Gray waiting for her. The others hadn't arrived yet so Anastasia took a seat to give them a chance to catch up.

Gray was staring out at the sky, his gaze distant and unfocused. He didn't look to Anastasia just watched the city around them. There were alarm sirens blaring through the city, sound of plasma shots, and she could hear some cars as some people tried to drive toward the escape shuttles. They were of no concern to the squad, only those that were under attack were part of their job. Anastasia stopped to check her gear had made it through fine, being sure that nothing was damaged or would jam. "How many marines have you heard burn?" Gray asked out of nowhere.

Anastasia looked to the older soldier and frowned. "Lost count," she answered as she stood up. She looked down one of the roads and spotted Shadow running toward them. She ignored the way Gray looked at her, that sort of unfamiliar look that questioned if she was joking or not. She'd gotten plenty of odd looks over the years because of the way she handled the death of teammates so she was used to it and now found it easy to ignore.

"So you're in charge now?" Gray asked as Shadow joined them. Anastasia shook her head in response. "But you're senior soldier, how are you not leader? If Alpha's dead who's supposed to lead us?"

Anastasia scanned the area looking for the two newer members of the squad. "I don't lead. I don't like taking the safety of others into my own hands. I'm responsible for me and you and Shadow can decide which of you leads," Anastasia explained. Neither Shadow nor Gray had been around when the last leader of the Wolves had died so they wouldn't know. If Sky were here she would have understood. She'd been there when the leader before Alpha had died but unfortunately a plasma grenade had taken Sky some months ago. Anastasia wasn't a leader, it just didn't suit her. The role required getting attached to the members of a team in the way Anastasia wasn't comfortable forcing. "Besides, you're more senior than me."

There was a bit of silence before Shadow spoke. "So what's the plan, Old Man?"

The group set out across the city toward where Phantoms seemed to be going. They made radio contact with the others and changed their meeting location to their new destination. Their trek was met with

resistance in the form of Grunts, Jackals, and a couple Ghosts that all were easily stopped by the ODST. There were a few civilians that they were able to direct to the safer paths and lead a few patrols away from civilians in hiding. The three of them had been working together for long enough that they'd learned how to act and react to each other's movements. It took them nearly a half hour to reach the position that seemed to be what the Covenant had been attacking. The roads were burnt, windows broken, and doors forced open. All signs of Covenant looking for civilians to kill. There was nothing left alive and it was a familiar sight for Anastasia, the Covenant having torn through the area leaving behind just burn marks, bits of meat, and blood.

"Seems they went that way," Anastasia observed. "If we hurry we can catch up to them and at least delay them giving civilians a chance."

Gray nodded and suddenly turned to his right, assault rifle raised and scanning the area. Anastasia raised her gun and turned to the same direction, searching for anything. She didn't see any enemies but something had caught Gray's attention so she remained on guard. They didn't spook easily so for a reaction like his the man must have been sure he'd seen something. There was a flash of light and Anastasia turned toward Gray, finding two blades of light stabbing through the man's chest. There was an odd movement behind Gray and Anastasia realized it was a stealth elite. She'd only met them a few times before but they were almost completely invisible and experts in being silent. She'd heard soldiers talk of enemies killing entire teams with ease and no one even seeing so much as a shimmer of their camouflage. The elite pulled its blade from Gray's chest and the marine fell to the ground.

The elite moved forward but it was too fast. Anastasia only got off one shot before the Elite raised its weapon and swung its sword. Anastasia dove to the side but she felt the blade slice through her side. She fell to the ground, her gun sliding across the road and out of reach, as the Elite loomed over her, prepared to finish her off. Gunfire pierced the air and the Elite turned away from Anastasia to Shadow. The bullets hit the alien's personal energy shield and it shimmered a bit but held strong. The alien darted toward the male marine, roaring in anger. Anastasia turned to her gun and tried to grab it, wanting to give her teammate whatever back up she could. Shadow screamed and she looked back to see that he was hanging limply from the Elite's grip. Blood seeped down Shadow's armor and Anastasia knew he was dead. There was just too much blood for him to be alive.

The Elite turned toward Anastasia and moved toward her. She turned back to her weapon and scrambled toward it. She'd just grabbed it when a foot landed on her back, pinning her down to the hard road. She looked over her shoulder and could see the Elite drawing its blade back. There was motion in the corner of her eye and she looked over just in time to see Rookie charging forward. He slammed a rock into the side of the Elite's helmet, causing it to stumble back and making its energy shield shimmer brightly before it vanished, overloaded by the force. Anastasia recognized the sound of a DMR and could see blood spout from the Elite as it tried to regain its senses. Rookie smacked it again in the head with the rock to keep it stunned, the force of the blow breaking one of the alien's mandibles. Anastasia rolled over and aimed, firing at the alien. Their rounds

tore through the Elite's head and neck, killing it.

Rookie moved over to Anastasia and checked her side. "Hot Pocket, bring me the med kit. Shadow had it." Hot Pocket did as he was instructed and Rookie retrieved the biofoam from the kit. Anastasia felt him inject it, ignoring the fire that spread over her side as the foam filled her wound.

Anastasia stood, her hand going to her side for a second as she adjusted to the pain. Her suit was covered with blood but it had stopped flowing which was good enough. "Good shooting, Rookie." She moved over to Gray's body. She picked up the assault rifle and moved back over to the pair. "Here, Stone, arm yourself. That rock's not going to stop a Wraith." The two others looked at each other and then nodded, understanding. Anastasia motioned down the street, the way they'd been heading before. "The Covies are that way. If we hurry we can still do some good." The others nodded and Anastasia took off at a brisk jog, wanting to make sure the mission wasn't a complete failure; Stone and Rookie following close behind.

4. Fire

Fire

Anastasia sat down on her cot and glanced around the room at her new teammates. They were all a bit on edge as this would be their first mission together. They'd been training for some time, had worked out their differences, and after a long verbal debate had decided to call themselves wolves. Now they were prepping to be fully deployed for their first real mission. This was going to be the first real mission that Anastasia would be going on. She'd trained, and then trained more in ODS training, and then a bit more with the wolves. Now it was time to put that training to the test.

Anastasia looked over to their team leader, First Sergeant Borstarn, or Father as most of them had nicknamed him. Anastasia refused to call him that, he was nothing like a father. The Sergeant was a good man who had been supportive and strong, without being threatening. She'd chosen just to call him Sarge. He was one of two members of the team that had previous experience. Anastasia was only nineteen, straight out of training, but Sarge was almost thirty with a couple encounters with the Covenant under his belt. He had training and Anastasia knew that they would all be relying on it on the mission. The only other soldier with experience was the second-in-command, a surly ODS who'd made a half dozen drops in his life, though some of those had been against rebels. He was at least in his fifties, maybe older, but Anastasia had never asked. The wolves had stated to call him XO despite the fact he wasn't an XO.

A red light flashed at one end of the room and Sarge stood up. "All right, Wolves, get in gear. It's now or never."

Anastasia snapped up, moving with the others down toward their pods. They had known that the signal would indicate they needed to get to their pods so they were all already suited up and ready to go. Anastasia felt an odd mixture of excitement and terror. She'd never done an actual drop but at the same time she wanted to get into combat, wanted to kill Covies. They reached the pod room and Anastasia grabbed her weapons. She felt a heavy hand on her shoulder

and she looked to see it belonged to Sarge. It was a calming hand, and it steadied her nerves. He nodded slightly and moved away. Anastasia paused for only a second before she moved to her pod and secured her weapons. She leaned back into the pod and secured herself in before sealing the hatch.

The nervous feeling grew and she gripped the handles inside the pod. "We've got Covies in the planet," Sarge's voice informed them. "Our job is to go down and shoot anything that isn't human. This is what we've trained for, so give 'em hell."

The radio communications cut off and was replaced by heavy metal music. Anastasia focused on the music, letting the heavy drums and electric guitar soothe her nerves some. She wasn't looking at the light when it turned green and the sudden drop caught her off guard. Her hands tensed and her training kicked in. There wasn't much to do other than stay calm and wait to hit the ground. The pod shook and she could feel the increasing force. She tensed and waited for her chute to open. She was pulled back suddenly as her chute opened and slowed her fall.

She'd been falling for a few seconds when something went wrong. She felt her pod start to shake and it felt like it was spinning. Anastasia felt panic, knowing there was nothing she could do. She felt a sudden jerk and heard metal snap. She could feel the forces on her grow and the temperature in the pod rose. Anastasia started to sweat and she could feel her skin burning. She would have screamed but sound seemed to be out of reach. She could see flames rushing over the window of the pod and she could feel them slipping through cracks into the pod to rush past her. She closed her eyes and just waited for the end to come. She continued to fall, until she suddenly stopped. Her head slammed against the hatch of the pod and everything went black.

Anastasia didn't know how much later it was when she woke up as her HUD wasn't working and she could see a large crack along her visor. There was blood in her right eye that made it hard to see, her head hurt like she'd just concrete face down, and her skin was uncomfortable where it had partially burned. She was having trouble focusing or thinking straight. She hit the release buttons and the hatch jettisoned. She heard shattering glass and pulled herself up, out of the pod. She dropped back in as a shard of glass stuck into her hand. She looked at the jagged shard and carefully pulled it out. Anastasia searched for a med pack but cursed as she realized she didn't have one. They had put medical packs in two of the pods in case one burned but she wasn't lucky enough to have one. She stood up and looked out the opening of her pod. She had landed and her pod was resting on its back, surrounded by glass. She guessed that she'd hit the sand, slid, melted the sand, and it had created a layer of glass around her pod. Anastasia's gaze turned toward the sky and she could see clouds and Covenant crafts. She couldn't tell the time of day or how much time had passed since she'd fallen.

Anastasia pulled herself out of her pod and she lay down on the warped glass of the melted sand. She didn't understand how she was alive but she was. She ignored the glass that broke under her weight and stabbed into any flesh it could. Anastasia checked to see if any of her weapons made it. Her assault rifle was partially melted and the only thing that seemed to have made it through was a pistol with one clip of ammunition and a single frag grenade. She knew it

was bad but he pounding in her head seemed to keep thought away enough that how bad her situation was didn't really dawn on her. She tried to get to her feet but failed, deciding to crawl away from the drop pod. She moved toward some black, jagged rocks that stuck up out of the ground. Her armor would best blend in with the stone and she needed to hide. She was injured and fighting wasn't a good idea, her sluggish movements were evidence of that.

Anastasia reached the rock after what felt like forever. She leaned against the rock and was just grateful nothing had come to check out her pod. She tested her radio but it had a very weak signal. Still, it was her best chance. She clicked on her radio. "She simply used a series of beeps to put out an SOS and set it on a loop. Her breathing was heavy, her limbs were stiff, and her thoughts were fuzzy.

She had just started to slip into unconsciousness when she heard a barking sound. Her eyes snapped open as she recognized the sound of a Grunt. Anastasia tensed and tried to keep still. Her hand gripped the pistol a bit tighter, aware that one clip might not be enough. She waited, planned, and hoped that they wouldn't even come close to her. She wasn't so lucky. A group of three Grunts, two Jackals, and a single minor Elite moved toward her pod. The overzealous Grunts raced forward and they jumped about as the bottoms of their feet touched the broken glass. One of them turned and Anastasia could tell she was caught. The Grunt barked and raised its plasma pistol. Anastasia raised her own pistol.

Three shots and the Grunts went down. The Jackals squawked in surprise and were moving their shields in the way. Anastasia fired twice more and killed one of the Jackal but the second shot hit a shield. Anastasia aimed for another shot but a great force slammed into her. Her head hit the rock and she found herself face to face with the Elite. It growled out something in its language and Anastasia knew the shots in her pistol wouldn't be enough. She went to the first thought that came to mind, although if her thoughts were more logical she might second guess her plan. She pulled out her frag grenade, pulled the pin, put a hand not the back of the Elite's head, and, before it could stop her, shoved the grenade into its mouth. The Elite released her and stepped back to pull the grenade out. Anastasia tried to turn away but the grenade went off before she could fully turn. The grenade went off, peppering the area with shrapnel and heat. Anastasia felt new pain as she fell to the ground, the explosion having knocked her through a loop.

Anastasia heard light steps nearby and looked over to see the foot of a Jackal near her head. The alien knelt down, trying to see if she was still alive. Anastasia had no energy to do anything and the jackal leaned back before a needled came into view. She closed her eyes and accepted that she wasn't able to stop what was about to happen. She heard a gunshot and a body hit the ground. Heavy steps rushed across the ground and she heard them slid to a halt near her. A voice cursed and her eyes snapped open as she knew it was human. She was rolled over and an ODS helmet came into view. A hand moved to her shoulder and the soldier looked back and spoke to another. Anastasia lifted her hand and gripped the forearm of the ODS above her. His head shot back to her placed a hand on hers. He shouted something but it was lost as Anastasia succumbed to exhaustion and blood loss.

When Anastasia woke up in the ship's infirmary. She had burns,

fractures, and cuts but most of them had been healed. She'd lost a lot of blood and been out for nearly a day. They'd already lost the planet and had gone into slip space. Anastasia felt awful, and it wasn't just because of her physical pain. She hadn't done anything on the mission other than nearly die. She made her way back to the barracks, hoping that the taunts from her fellow marines wouldn't be too bad. She paused outside the room for a second and prepared herself for the teasing before she walked in.

As soon as she entered the room two people grabbed her. She automatically fought against them but the two of them were too strong. She hadn't fully recovered and they easily pulled her over to a cot and pinned her down and another pushed her shirt up along her back. "Stop struggling." Anastasia looked over to see Sarge standing to the side. "You don't want him to screw up the lines."

Anastasia heard a buzzing behind her and she recognized the sound. She felt the familiar pain and relaxed, not wanting to screw up whatever they were tattooing on her back. The marines sat in silence while one of them worked. "Can someone tell me what is being tattooed on my back?"

"We're fixing your other tattoo," XO answered. He sat down where Anastasia could see him and she felt a bit of panic. She knew she hadn't done well on their first mission but they couldn't remove her wolf tattoo. "Your pod was on fire," XO said, glancing back at the man who was tattooing Anastasia's back. "I don't know how but you survived it." Anastasia shrugged a bit but didn't verbally respond. "I've seen pods catch fire but never seen a soldier survive. The pod is unforgiving but I've never seen it be defied."

"All finished," the marine on her back said and she felt his weight move away. Anastasia sat up and a marine moved a mirror over so she could look at it. She was surprised by what she saw. They had tattooed flames around the wolf head that was on her back and wrote ODSST below it. "So what do you think?"

"I don't understand," Anastasia admitted. "I didn't do anything other than have my pod screw up on that mission?"

"You didn't screw up. A Hell Jumper doesn't decide for their pod to malfunction, it just does," Sarge said. "You survived, and killed a few Covenant. You did fine." He smiled slightly. "You'll make up for it next time, Fire. Though if you can kill a patrol in that condition I look forward to what you can do when in fighting shape." Anastasia furrowed her brow, confused for a moment until it dawned on her. He hadn't called her Novara, Private, or Princess. "All right, Wolves, head to cryo. Not you, Fire. Pacifists said that you needed to recover or it would do damage to your wounds." He placed a hand on her shoulder for a second as he passed her. "Get some rest."

"Yes, sir." Anastasia watched as her team left and she was left alone in the room. She stood from the cot and moved into the bathroom, once more lifting her shirt enough to see the tattoo on her back. She smiled, feeling a bit of pride. Her wolf now looked like a proper ODSST tattoo and it meant a bit more that her teammates had done it. The new ink hurt but she didn't mind it, it was worth it. Anastasia moved back into the barracks and lay down on her cot, chest down. She relaxed into the warmth of her cot and let sleep take her and ease away the ache and exhaustion.

5. Sister

Sister

John entered the barracks, standing tall and with his face neutral. Eight eyes turned toward him but he kept himself composed. Their barracks were clean though he noticed that there wasn't much personalization to their spaces. He was used to soldiers personalizing the places they slept, but maybe the Spartan IV were more Spartan than he realized. They seemed surprised to see a Spartan II in a combat uniform and he seemed to stand out with them all in casual clothing. They all just watched him, waiting for him to say something. He turned toward one of the women. "Spartan Novara, I need to speak to you."

"What did you do now?" one of the men asked. The female Spartan shot a glare at him but didn't say anything.

John led her out of the room and down a hallway to an empty room. There was a screen that showed Earth and the stars around it. He looked to the comfortable chairs for people to relax on. "Have a seat if you want," he said, motioning to the chairs. The woman remained standing. John sighed and considered how to start. He wished that Kelly was here but she refused to join him. He wished he'd been able to convince her but she had been set in her decision.

"Can you just tell me what you want with me?" The woman asked. She didn't seem at all intimidated by him but maybe that was because ranks were foggy with the Spartan IV. Sure, each team had a handler in ops and there was Commander Palmer, but everyone else was just Spartan. No rank, just Spartan. John still wasn't sure where that left him in the ranking structure, not that it really mattered with him out of action.

"Your name is Anastasia Novara?" The woman simply nodded. "Do you know who I am?" John asked.

"Yeah, you're Master Chief Petty Officer Spartan one-one-seven. The big hero and legend." The Spartan IV seemed unimpressed by his reputation. Maybe that would make this easier, or harder.

"That's not exactly what I mean," John clarified. "My name is John." He frowned, not sure what to say next. The woman just stared at him, seeming bored. "A long time ago, a little over forty years ago I was John Novara."

"Yeah, I sort of figured that." Anastasia crossed her arms, her stance defensive. "You look just like the ass hole," she muttered. "So what do you want?"

John was caught a bit off guard. He hadn't expected her to be so blunt, or the agitation. He suddenly regretted his actions, thinking he should have never tried to meet her. "I don't really know", he admitted. He really didn't know where to go from here and her anger was more than he had expected. "Iâ€|they brought up our history in court and I looked into it. I wanted to know how my father became a rebel. Then I found out that I had a sister and I dug into that. I didn't expect you to be a Spartan." Anastasia scowled at that and

John realized his misstep. "That is with him being a rebel I didn't expect you to be a soldier."

"Yeah well I'm nothing like my father," Anastasia assured him. "He's a traitor that only cares about himself and revenge. That still doesn't explain why you wanted to talk to me."

"I can't explain it," John admitted. "I just felt like I should. Our mother died when Reach was attacked and our father stands on the opposite side from us. I guess I just know what it's like to have your family gone or missing and wanted to—I don't know, offer you some family you agree with." John looked the woman over, realizing how different they were. She slouched and was visibly unhappy while he stood straight and she likely couldn't see the emotions he felt. It was odd to him that they were siblings but so different. "I'm sorry, I seem to be making you angry. That was not my intention."

"I'm not angry at you, I just hate your face," Anastasia clarified.

"So you're mad because I look like our father?" John asked. "Do you really hate him that much for being a rebel?" He wasn't happy with his father as a rebel but he wasn't particularly mad at the man. Maybe it was because although he referred to him as their father John didn't really feel that connection to him.

"I don't hate him because he's a rebel. I hate him for other reasons," Anastasia corrected. "I should hate you, you know? I should want you dead and hate you with every cell of my body."

"Then why don't you?" John asked. He had fully been expecting that hating him was an option for her. He had been expecting it even.

Anastasia looked away from him and let out a frustrated sigh.

"Because I guess I'm more jealous of you. I don't give a shit about you being a Spartan or being the all mighty Master Chief. I'm jealous that you got out of our damn family. Besides, it's not like you ever did anything to me. I can't blame you for the actions of others."

John didn't know exactly what to say, he didn't really understand. Was their father really that bad? He was once more caught with no idea how to push forward. He wanted to ask what their father had done that was so bad but it felt like asking a random person on the street about it. Still, there was no other option that he could think of, or maybe his curiosity was just causing him to see no other option. "What did he do?"

Anastasia narrowed her gaze but still didn't turn toward him. "Why do you care? Just be glad you don't know." She finally turned to look at him. "Be glad that you didn't have to go through any of it." She let her arms fall to her side. "Is there anything else?"

John frowned and tried to come up with something. He didn't want her to leave, he wanted her to stay. He didn't like that he had more questions than he'd had when they had started talking. Anastasia shrugged, giving up, and turned to walk away. "Wait." John didn't even really know why he was stopping her. She didn't want him in her

life and he didn't want to force himself into her life, but here he was, forcing her to stop from walking away.

He reached out, his hand grabbing her wrist just tight enough to keep her from moving away. Anastasia froze and John saw her flinch. He didn't understand why but he did realize that the skin under his fingers wasn't smooth. John looked down to the woman's wrist and slowly turned his hand so he could see her wrist. Her arms were covered with scars, some of them obviously from shrapnel, some that seemed a bit too clean, but he was mainly focused on the straight scar directly along her wrist. John furrowed his brow, not understanding exactly why it bothered him. It was just a scar, like all soldiers who had fought in the war. There was something different though about this one. Whoever had stitched it hadn't taken care of the injuries properly and they were lumpy and the skin was rougher than John would have expected. He looked over to her other wrist and could see that there was a matching scar on her other wrist. "Where did you get those?"

Anastasia tugged her arm away but John held on. "It's none of your business." She tugged again and he released her wrist. She gripped her wrist protectively and took a step away from him. There was anger in her eyes but there he could swear there was a hint of fear under it. John put up his hands to show that he was making no move to touch her or had ill intentions. "I don't know you well enough."

John nodded, accepting her wishes for him to back off. "I will not intrude or push too hard on things you don't wish to speak about. I do apologize for any trouble I've caused you, now or in the past, and will not stop you if you wish to leave."

Anastasia looked down toward the floor and let out a long breath. "I told you, you didn't directly do anything," she corrected. "I justâ€¦ I don't understand what you want from me? Why you want to talk to me? You don't have any obligation to have anything to do with me just because of some stupid genetics."

"I understand that," John assured her. "But I want to know you. Your record is good but rather repetitive. Not very informative." John watched her as he spoke; looking for any sign that he was angering her. "I would like to get to know you."

"I don't understand why," Anastasia said. "Why would you want to know anything about me? My life is boring. Years of the war, drops, killing Covies, and then I became a Spartan IV. Nothing all that interesting."

John wasn't particularly happy that he didn't seem to be making progress. "Then will you tell me why you hate our father so much? I know you think I don't want to know but I want to know. If it is my fault I have a right to know what I caused."

"You sure have a damn lot of questions without much right to ask. I don't care if you're the root cause, I don't want to talk about it so I won't, and you won't find it out from any other way, he made sure of that." Anastasia crossed her arms, defiant. It was a bit odd to John as most soldiers were intimidated by a Spartan II.

John was starting to get slightly frustrated with how combative the woman was being. He decided that if she wanted combative he would be

combative. "I don't see how I have no right to ask these things. If I caused problems I want to know about them. I want to know what kind of a man our father was. Your record says you make regular trips to a military psychologist, and you have for years. Your enlistment interview file says that there were already indications of mental stress from before you became a soldier that only got worse over the years, so much so that your ability to remain a soldier was questioned after the end of the war."

Anger sparked through Anastasia's eyes and she walked over to John. She moved and John braced for a hit, surprised when it came in the form of her hand slapping his face. He was stunned by the action and the anger that he seem to have brought up. "How dare you say that. For someone who claims they want to get to know me you sure seem to be trying to get me to just walk away. Why won't you just let this go?"

"Because I keep thinking about it. The lack of information, the mental issues, the fact that he's become a rebel. I don't understand how it all fits together, but I want to know. I'm partially the cause of all of this, of whatever broke you mentally. I want to know if I can fix it," John explained.

"I'm not broken," Anastasia asserted. "There is nothing wrong with me and I don't need fixing," she nearly shouted, her breathing becoming deeper and he could see her anger rising. "If anyone here is broken it's you."

John tensed at that accusation. It was the same thing that was being argued in court and here he was hearing it from his sister. "I'm not broken either."

"Oh really?" Anastasia was tense and she suddenly lifted her arms so he could see the scars along her wrists. "Most people, even broken ones, know what these are from. If you don't know maybe you're broken worse than even someone like me." She suddenly took several steps back and turned her arms to hide the scars. John once more saw the mix of anger and fear on her face.

John didn't know how to respond. No, he didn't know what the scars meant, and he wasn't sure what that said about him. John didn't like the sort of pain that was coming up from her accusation. It was like having all the pain brought up in court but all at once. He didn't like how this woman was able to hurt him so easily, family or not. John watched her for a moment before he finally spoke again. "What are they from?" Anastasia looked away from him and took another step away. She seemed like a wounded dog, scared but ready to strike if he got too close. "I don't know what they're from, but that doesn't mean I'm broken. It just means that I've never been confronted with the cause."

"Lucky you," Anastasia grumbled. She sighed but still refused to look at him. "You really want to know what our father was like?" She turned to look at him and John nodded. "He was an ass," she began. "He was neglectful, never really cared about me. I can't remember a time he wasn't a rebel and that was all he cared about. I hate him because he never made time for family, too busy trying to destroy the UNSC to do school functions or take his kid to the park."

John frowned at her words. "That's only half true."

"It's the most truth you're going to get out of me," Anastasia said as she turned and moved for the door.

This time John didn't try to stop her, letting the woman walk out of the door. He remained in the silence for several minutes before he finally left, heading to the hanger where he caught one of the Pelicans down to the planet. He couldn't figure out what part of what Anastasia had said was a lie and what was truth. He thought about it and the scars on the ride down and the entire drive across base. He only stopped thinking about it once he entered his house.

John moved into the kitchen and sat down at the table. He set his forearms on the table and leaned on them, letting his mind consider what information he might have over looked. He just didn't understand it, and still couldn't figure out what Anastasia had kept from him.

"It didn't go well?" Kelly asked. John looked up to see her standing in the doorway. "Tell me what happened." She sat down across from him at the table.

"She wasâ€¦ combative. She refused to answer questions, claimed I was better off not knowing." John sat up a bit and realized that the answer was sitting before him. John was not well versed in more common things but Kelly was. "She said that she hated our father because he was neglectful but that was only a half truth. She had these scars." John moved his arms to show Kelly his wrists and then traced where the scars were. "I don't know what they meant but there was something about them."

Kelly's hands moved out and rested on his wrists. He looked up and could see that something was troubling her. "John, tell me what happened from the beginning." John recounted his meeting with Anastasia, trying to repeat her words exactly so Kelly could properly examine them. She listened and nodded but he could see that she understood better than him. When he finished she turned her gaze to her hands still on his wrist. "First, if you want her not to hate you calling her broken was a bad idea."

"I know," John admitted. "At least apologizing gives me a way to start a new conversation. What I need to know is what she is keeping from me."

Kelly's gaze was distant as her fingers gently moved over his skin. "John, have you considered that she's trying to do you a kindness? Whatever she's keeping from you seems to be directly connected to the Spartan II project and she's trying to save you from the guilt."

John frowned, dissatisfied with her response. "But I want to know. It is partially my responsibility. When I cause harm to others, whether on purpose or by accident, I still want to know. Remember when you sprained your ankle. That wasn't directly because of my actions but it was still my responsibility and I had a right to know I'd caused it. This is the same situation."

Kelly let out a long breath and relented. "Fine, I'll tell you what information you're missing but the actual story you'll have to convince her to tell you. I can't be sure with the given information

of a situation but there are hints to possibility. Are you sure you want to know?" John nodded and Kelly continued. Her fingers traced over his wrists where the scars had been on Anastasia. "Scars like those are usually from self-harm or attempted suicide. Why she did that I can't say for sure, only she knows."

John was stunned, not sure what to make of the new information. He found it hard to wrap his head around the concept. He remembered the fear under her anger and considered that it might be true. "So what do I do?" John wasn't sure where to go from here with this new information.

"We'll you've got two options really," Kelly answered. You can either accept her fake story and her act of kindness, leaving that part if it all in the past and trying to make a bond with her now. Or you can just stubbornly focus on trying to figure out what she's not telling you and confront her about it probably causing her to get mad at you. You and I both know what you'll choose to do." John looked to the table top and sighed, knowing as well what choice he would make.

6. Numb

Numb

Anastasia stared out the window of her room, watching the rain slid down the glass. The skies were dark and there seemed to be no end in sight. Most twelve-year-olds would still be outside despite the rain, running around and splashing in the puddles. Anastasia had never liked he rain. She didn't like being soaked in cold water, she preferred being warm and dry. She liked sunny days for playing, not that she wanted to play. The cloudy sky above felt more attune to her gloomy disposition anyway.

Anastasia's finger ran over the bandages on her wrist, wishing she could just tear them off. The stitches underneath itched and she'd give anything to just be able to scratch them to her heart's content. She didn't dare remove them, though. Her father was furious enough at her and she didn't want to incur his wrath again. Her bruises hadn't healed completely from the last time and she didn't want him to add more. She was sure he wouldn't hesitate. The man who had seen up her wrists had seller to suggest it. "Suicide is the action of the weak," the man had said as he used needle and thread, sitting at his kitchen table, to see the cuts. "Maybe you should toughen your child up more and she would t be doing things like this." That comment had angered Anastasia. He had t numbed her, didn't take any care not to jab the needle sharply into her skin, but she never made a sound. She wondered what this man knew of pain, or being weak.

She watched a single drop of rain trail down the window and she remembered the red liquid flowing from her wrists. She couldn't remember ever actually connecting her pain with the liquid or identifying it as blood. She remembered the knife in her hand, the way the blood had coated her hand causing the cut on her right wrist to be uneven and jagged. The one on her left wrist had been straight and cleaner, well as clean as she could have made it. She remembered trying to keep her hands over the sink so she didn't make too much of a mess. She couldn't help worry about how mad her father would be if she got blood all over the bathroom. She hadn't counted on how light

headed the blood loss had made her, or collapsing and hitting her head on the toilet. She should have sat down. Maybe they wouldn't have found her if she'd just sat down. She hadn't had the ability to think of that as she'd bleed and had t even considered that at some point her strength would wane to a point she couldn't stand.

The man who had seen her up had said something about the cuts only being to get attention. Anastasia didn't understand that. Attention was the last thing she wanted, she'd rather be forgotten, left alone. She'd he'd made some sort of motion down his arm but she didn't really understand what he'd been saying as her head was still fuzzy so she hadn't understood the bigger words. She hated that man who her father had taken her to. He talked and acted like her father, called her actions a disgrace. He was only fueling the anger of her father, people like him always did. They both acted like they knew what she'd done, why, but they had no idea.

Her father had refused to take her to a hospital. He'd grumbled explanations about the police getting involved and him wanting to stay out of their business. He was always so paranoid but for the first time she saw that he truly didn't care about her. He was so focused on the police and keeping them out of their lives that he wouldn't even take her to an actual doctor. The things they'd said, he made it clear that he wasn't worried about her, simply how people would look at their family because of her. Anastasia had always feared her father, been emotionally and physically hurt by him, but for the first time she felt hatred. He didn't care about saving her life because he had a shred of love for her, just didn't want the stigma of a dead child. Though he wasn't so worried about her dying that he took her to someone that was even a vet. From the mounted animals in the mans home Anastasia would have guessed he was a taxidermist.

The door to Anastasia's room opened and she turned to see her mother place a bowl on her dresser. Anastasia waited until the woman left before she stood, retrieving the bowel. She made her way back to the window, opening it just a bit. Anastasia poured out most of the slip before pulling the bowl back in. She set the nearly empty bowl on the table beside her and curled back up on the cushioned window seat. Hopefully her parents would be tricked enough by the empty bowl that they'd think she was eating. She hadn't been eating at first, or trying to hide it, but that had gotten anger from her father and words from her mother that she'd tuned out. Since then she'd been tossing away part of her food to make it look like she was eating. Anastasia had tried eating the first day but she'd vomited it right back up. Since then she'd nibbled at some of her food but it had made her feel sick so she had stopped. She'd eat again, eventually, but right now even thinking of it made her uneasy.

Until then she'd switch before sleeping on her bed and sitting in her window. She wasn't allowed outside and her mother had said there were too many sharp objects in the rest of the house. Anastasia found it ridiculous that they thought she'd try again. Now they'd be watching and if she tried she wouldn't stand a chance. They'd catch her before the job was done. She wasn't allowed outside because someone might see her bandages and ask questions, so that couldn't be allowed. She was only allowed out of her room to go to the bathroom of which she now had to keep the door open. Anastasia knew this would pass, it was only temporary until they could at least take the bandages off, then she'd be let out.

Anastasia stood and moved over to the bed, reaching between the mattress and the base, grabbing the scrap of cloth. She crawled up on her bed and lay down. She ran her fingers over the image of the eagle on the cloth before she shoved it down her shirt. She curled up on the sheets and made herself comfortable, or as comfortable as she could be, curled around the cloth.

7. Bunny

****Bunny****

Anastasia had never had a pet before, so she'd been surprised when her father had shown her the little baby bunny and informed her she'd be taking care of it. Over the weeks that followed she learned to feed, groom, and check the bunny for health issues. Her father had told her not to name the animal, but she couldn't help but decide to call the black and white spotted rabbit "Patches". Though she only called him that when she was alone, he was always just "the rabbit" in front of her father. Anastasia watched as the little ball of fluff became a soft, gentle adult bunny. She hadn't really made any friends since they'd come to Reach, but she felt a kinship with Patches. Her father kept the rabbit in a cage at all times, and Anastasia would have liked to let him out and hold him, but she couldn't risk Patches getting away. That would be a surefire way to anger her father. Still, the bunny was the closest thing to a friend that Anastasia had. He was excited to see her when she came to feed him, and he would sit still and let her pet his soft fur. She loved Patches like she'd never loved anything before—and then she made a mistake. Then she called him Patches when her father was around.

It seemed strange to see Patches outside of his cage, but here he was in the open, sitting on the grass. He stared at her with those big black eyes, his body shaking in fear - maybe from being on grass for the first time, or maybe because of the club that was in Anastasia's hand. Patches had been so excited when Anastasia had come to the cage, but she hadn't shared the enthusiasm. Her father grabbed Patches by the scruff of his neck and roughly had carried him away. Anastasia had followed, biting back the urge to plead for mercy for the bunny. Her father tied patches by the leg to a stick, and had given Anastasia the club. Patches had struggled at first but when he realized he was not going to get away, he curled up and just sat, trembling. Anastasia's father had commanded her to hit the rabbit with the club, to kill it. She was sure Patches didn't understand the threat really, but still instinctively knew danger when he saw it.

Anastasia didn't understand why she was being made to do this, it didn't make any sense. She had never killed any animal before and she didn't want to, least of all Patches. She could see her own fear mirrored back in the marble-black eyes of the bunny before her. How could she possibly bring herself to kill the helpless little animal? But she knew if she didn't her father would be mad, and her back was still healing from the last time she'd disobeyed him. Was avoiding that pain worth killing Patches? She didn't think so. She didn't understand why Patches needed to be killed at all. He was well behaved, he didn't eat that much, and he didn't make any noise. There was no reason for Patches to die.

"Kill it," her father growled. He looked over her like a shadow of death, demanding her to do as she was told. "Kill it."

"But I don't understand why," Anastasia tried to argue. "It didn't do anything to make it a problem, so why do I need to kill it?"

"Are you questioning orders?" Her father barked.

"No, sir, only trying to understand your orders." She fought not to cringe away from him. She was bracing herself for a smack or a strike of some kind for speaking up.

"It is not your job to understand your orders, only complete them," Her father informed her. "You've been told to kill it so that is what you'll do. It doesn't matter if it's done anything wrong, it has to die. This rabbit is tonight's dinner." His words horrified Anastasia. It made her feel sick to think that anyone would eat the gentle bunny. "It has to die for something more important, for dinner."

Anastasia didn't think that was a good enough reason. There was plenty of meat in their house, beef and pork, and she didn't have to kill anything to get that. She would rather not eat than kill Patches, but still she didn't see a way out. Her father would be furious with her if she didn't do what he was ordering, but she didn't know how she'd feel if she killed the bunny. Anastasia weighed how willing she was to risk her father's wrath, and how reluctant she was to kill Patches.

"What are you waiting for? You have your orders, now follow them." Her father's voice was low and threatening, a warning of the possible consequences of disobedience.

Anastasia focused only on Patches, and the fear that she could tell was rolling off the bunny. She frowned as she realized that she was just as afraid as Patches was, and that she was the source of the bunny's fear. Anastasia let her hand go limp and the club fell to the ground.

She didn't see the hand coming, but the force knocked Anastasia off her feet. "Useless child!" her father spat. Anastasia heard a thump and it was followed by the most horrifying sound she'd ever heard. It was like a banshee screaming, a high-pitched cry that struck down to Anastasia's bones. She rolled over to look at her father and realized that the scream was coming from Patches. The first hit hadn't killed the bunny, and it was now screaming in pain and terror. Her father raised the club again and Anastasia acted.

She threw herself at his arm, trying to stop him from striking Patches again. He batted her away with ease and Anastasia fell on her rear. Her father struck Patches a few more times before he finally stopped. Her father stood and turned to Anastasia. She could see the fury in his eyes and knew that she was in trouble. He stood up and reached down, grabbing Patches by the ears. Anastasia scrambled to her feet and did the dumbest thing yet - she dashed to her father and grabbed the bunny's lifeless body. She wrapped her arms around it and pulled it from his grasp, but stumbled and fell back down onto the ground. She instinctively curled up protectively around Patches.

Her father pulled at her arms, trying to pry her off of the bunny,

but she held tight. Anastasia cried out as he yanked on her wrist and pain shot through it. But she remained wrapped around the corpse, even as her father hit her and tugged at her arms, trying to get her to let go. She wasn't sure how long he tried to separate her and the dead rabbit, but he eventually grew tired. Anastasia didn't dare look up, and just stayed huddled until she heard him stomp away. She knew that when she went back to the house things were going to be bad, but she still had to take care of Patches first.

Anastasia cautiously got to her feet. Her cheek and wrist hurt, and she could feel a bit of blood on her forehead from where it had been scratched when she fell down. She found a place near some trees that seemed to have soft soil and she dug at the ground until she had made a hole that was deep enough. She sat under the tree, cradling the body of Patches in her arms, wondering what it would have been like to hold the bunny when he'd still been warm. She buried her friend in the hole she'd dug, but didn't mark the grave. She was afraid her father would find it and then dig up Patches just to spite her, to punish her.

The sun was low in the sky when she finally decided to go back home. She made sure to scrape off the dirt from her shoes and hands before she entered the back door of the house. Her mother was in the kitchen, but didn't even look in Anastasia's direction when she entered the room. She knew where her father would be, and she knew she couldn't avoid what was going to happen. She stepped into the living room where her father was waiting for her. She wouldn't run, and she wasn't ashamed of what she'd done; but she did fear what she knew was coming.

8. Rory

Rory

Anastasia sat on her bed, staring at the tablet in her hand. She didn't even know why she was looking at these names. She had just been relaxing; trying to recover from the wounds she'd received during the fight to defend Earth. The UNSC's shrinks hadn't cleared her for active duty yet, so she had nothing better to do. To fill the time something had caused her to look up the casualty reports.

She hadn't expected to find anything significant, just a list of names that she'd look over to pass the time. She hadn't expected to see his name on the list, hadn't even been looking for it. She just sat and stared at the four letters that were all that was left of the man she'd known.

She'd only encountered him three times, but it had been more than enough for him to make an impact on her life. There was just something about him that she liked, something that made her feel comfortable. If asked why she couldn't have explained what it was about him that made her feel at ease, he just did. She'd always been surprised at how happy she was to see him and how welcome she was for his company.

"Oh, Rory" she muttered.

The third time she'd seen him hadn't been that long ago, right before all Hell had broken out across Reach. Anastasia had only recently

been given the team of Wolves that would end up being her last, the ones that she'd watch be torn apart by the Flood. They hadn't seemed anything special when she'd met them, and she'd kept a bit of distance, as she did with all new members of the Wolves. No reason to get attached to new soldiers, as they were the most likely to die.

Anastasia had been sitting on a crate in the hangar, watching her new team from a distance. They all seemed to be getting along fine, which didn't surprise her. No veterans around to give the rookies a hard time, just a ton of hot pockets getting to know each other, giving the one survivor space. She hated them at that moment, not only because they were getting along, but because of how they avoided her. She'd been sitting alone for a while when they'd all gathered about twenty feet from her.

It was then that he appeared and sat down beside her. At first she was annoyed that anyone dared to approach her when she was in her current mood, but then she looked over at him. His gray-blue eyes were watching her passively, waiting to see if she'd recognize him. Anastasia was surprised to see him here, or ever again. Each time she'd spoken to him it seemed like it would be the last time, and when he appeared again it was always a surprise. She smiled at him and relaxed in his presence. "Hey, Rory."

The younger man smiled a charming, but genuine, lop sided smile. Anastasia felt heat on her cheeks flare up at the attraction she felt toward him. It was a feeling that caught her off guard, as she hadn't felt it in so long, and she'd always guarded herself as much as she could from the feeling. "Well hello, Fire." He smirked as he noticed her blush. "I see that you're happy to see me."

Anastasia frowned at his teasing - feeling embarrassed, she was a bit defensive. "No, your hair color just reminded me of this new, cute guy on my team." Anastasia looked toward the Wolves and in the direction of a young man with brown hair.

"If he's so cute, why are you sitting with me instead of him?" Rory asked, leaning a bit toward her. He looked over to the group and frowned. "I don't recognize any of them." He looked to Anastasia, watching her carefully.

"Yeah, the last mission wiped the last ones out," Anastasia explained casually. "They gave me all new blood. I'm betting one or two make it through this next mission, and maybe only one will get a proper name." Anastasia frowned at the group of ODST, trying to figure which ones would die first. "And I'm not sitting with you by the way; I was sitting minding my own business and you sat with me."

"True enough, but that still doesn't explain why you're not sitting with them." Rory motioned toward the Wolves who were smiling and chatting.

"I was here first. They came in after me and decided not to sit with me. If they don't want me around then why should I bother with them?" Anastasia crossed her arms and slouched a bit.

"You were here before them, in more ways than one," Rory observed. "They're probably just intimidated by you. But then again, who wouldn't be? I can assure you I'm intimidated by a beautiful, strong

woman like you."

Anastasia smiled slightly at the man beside her, not even minding the arm that had slipped around her shoulders. "Do you use that pick up line on all the girls?"

"Never used it on a girl, and I've only used it on one woman. But she was very special and absolutely worth breaking out my best moves." Rory grinned and Anastasia couldn't help but smile and laugh lightly. "Seems that my moves are working." Anastasia leaned on the arm around her shoulder. "You seem to be really used to getting new teammates, is it that common for ODS teams to have people die?"

Anastasia furrowed her brow and tilted her head, not understanding the sudden question. "Why do you care about what a team is like?" Rory shrugged in response and Anastasia didn't know what to make of it. "Most teams aren't like mine; we're sort of a suicide squad. Most teams don't have such a high level of casualties because their jobs aren't as dangerous."

"And you've survived them all," Rory muttered quietly. "You're either extremely lucky, or incredibly unlucky." Anastasia didn't respond to that, she didn't know how to. "Do you really hate being on a team so much? I would think that if you were all alone you'd get lonely."

"And having a team is better? Having to watch them die, always being surrounded by new faces that pretend to know you but they have no idea who you are. How is that any different than being alone? You work on your own, and you don't get lonely." Anastasia turned her gaze to the floor.

"Everyone gets lonely," Rory contradicted, hugging her a bit tighter to his side. "Even I get lonely. And when we're hurt we seek out the company of those we have bonds with, people that understand us, for the people that we care about." Rory moved his hand over and let it rest on her knee. "We look for a companion that can understand us so we don't feel so alone."

Anastasia was struck by the statement, realizing what he meant. There was something about having Rory's arm around her and his hand on her knee that felt intimate, but at the same time it was just warm, comforting. "So I keep meeting you because you want a companion?"

"Only this time," Rory answered, his hand moving from her knee to gently take her hand in his. "I got some news and I wanted to find someone I trust to be with. I guess I got lucky when I spotted you here, sitting all alone. You're the only person I'd want to be sitting with right now."

"Wow, you must be really desperate to come to me, Rory." Anastasia smiled slightly and shook her head. "So, what's the news that's so bad you've come to me for company?"

Rory didn't speak right away and Anastasia didn't dare say anything. "I'm going to be assigned to a team," he finally said. Anastasia turned toward him, surprised. As long as she'd known him he'd only worked on his own, so the thought of him being on a team was impossible. "I have to say, I was a bit disappointed when I saw the

name of the team wasn't Wolf." He smiled slightly before he continued. "I would love to be a member of your pack."

"You'd die if you were," Anastasia retorted. "So what is the name of the team that you're going to be on?" She looked to his hand that was still holding hers.

"Sorry, can't tell you that," Rory answered. "Another bit of my life hidden in black ink, that sort of thing. I don't really know much about them, but they're soldiers like me."

"You are a hard man to get information on, or contact, particularly with no last name to search." Anastasia had always found him impossible to track, and it seemed that was what the UNSC was aiming for.

"A man has to keep some secrets. Besides, I like Novara way more. Rory Novara, it has a certain ring to it." Rory smiled but she could see that he was hiding something. She'd seen all kinds of expressions over the years, both outbursts and suppressed emotions.

"Why are you talking to me about this?" Anastasia asked.

"A couple reasons," Rory began. "You're the only person I have, anywhere. I don't usually meet people twice, and I don't feel as comfortable with them as I do with you. The second is because we're in similar situations. You may be the old hardened wolf of the pack but you'll go into combat with a group of people you don't know, that don't know you, but are still your team. How do you do it, just walk into a team and deal with it?"

Anastasia shifted a bit, not sure how to answer at first. She never really thought about it, she always just became a part of a new team, without effort. "There isn't a trick to it," she finally began. "A new team comes in and I just fall into line behind whoever leads. Someone takes command and all I have to do is follow orders, and survive. When you meet this new team there will be someone that gives orders, just do what they say and keep your head low until you get a feel for where you fit in. I mean, usually I just ignore people until they prove they'll be able to survive. But you probably won't lose any teammates for some time."

Rory nodded his head and looked down to their clasped hands. "Thanks for the advice; I'll take it to heart. I guess I'm really lucky to have you and all your experience. Maybe I'll find a way to contact you once I've settled into my team. I'll tell you what it's like to have teammates that don't die," he joked.

"I think I'd like that," Anastasia said, smiling slightly at the idea of him contacting her. His hand gripped hers just a bit tighter for a moment and she looked to their hands. "Why am I letting you hold my hand?" She hadn't even paid attention to the action, or the arm around her, until now.

"Like I said, we all feel lonely sometimes, and want the company of those that understand us." Rory leaned in a bit toward her. "Lonely souls can find comfort in each other."

"How do you know I'm lonely? I'm fine on my own," Anastasia asserted.

"Because I recognize loneliness in your eyes. I see the same thing when I look at my reflection." Rory looked away for a second. "It seems your team is leaving. If following is what you're going to do, then you should probably follow."

Anastasia sighed; disappointed that she was already leaving his company so soon. She'd hoped that this time she'd get to know him more, but life had never been so kind to her. "I guess you're right." She slipped her hand from his and his arm fell from her shoulder.

They stood and Rory gave her a warm smile. "As always, seeing you again has been more than a pleasure." He pursed his lips for a moment and then shrugged. "What the hell, I wanted to do this last time anyway." He leaned forward and his lips touched Anastasia's. She was caught off guard by the sudden affection and barely any chance to return the kiss before Rory pulled away. "See you again soon, Fire. I promise to try to look you up." He smiled widely before he turned around and moved away, toward an exit of the hangar. Anastasia watched him go for a moment before she turned and walked toward the rookies that made up her new team.

When she'd first met him she'd never have expected she'd ever sit intimately with him or welcome a kiss from him. They'd been on a ship heading to some of the outer colonies and had been patrolling a system. Anastasia had been sitting on her own in the gym, her team having finished their training. The more veteran soldiers had been tossing around the rookies to toughen them up, or at least that was what they told the rookies. Really they were just bored and it was something to do. Anastasia hadn't taken part, she didn't care enough to join in and she waited for them to leave before she started her own workout in silence. She'd finished her weight training for the day and was taking a short break to decide what to do next.

That was when he'd entered the gym, seeming to have been waiting for the more solitary environment as well. His hair was a light brown, his eyes were a gray-blue, and his nose seemed a bit big for his face. Still, he was pretty cute, so Anastasia watched him for a bit. He moved to the sparring mat and stopped at the edge. "You want to spar or are you going to just stare?" He turned toward her when he finished speaking.

Anastasia scowled, annoyed with having been caught. She stood up and moved to join him beside the mat. "You sure that's a good idea? I'm tougher than I look." Anastasia was not the most muscular of soldiers, but she'd learned enough from both training and combat that she could hold her own in a match.

"Give me your best shot," he said as he stepped onto the mat. He was grinning happily and she wanted to smack that look off of his face. She stepped onto the mat and both took fighting postures. They stood, waiting for the other to make the first move. "If neither of us attacks then this is going to be the longest staring match of all time."

"Then why don't you grow a pair and attack?" Anastasia snapped.

"Because your outward appearance would indicate that you probably use

your opponents first strike against them to make up for your lack of brute strength, so attacking you first would be stupid of me." The man smiled slightly, like he was laughing inside at some silent joke.

"Well usually with bigger stronger enemies I would wait. But with you, I don't think I need to." Anastasia moved forward and threw a punch from the left. The man raised an arm to block it with ease. She pulled away her left arm and struck with her right. The man blocked it the same way, with an amused smirk on his face. Anastasia smirked as well as she spotted and opening and her leg collided with his side. The man backed away but he seems to be thrilled by the strike. "Your form sucks," Anastasia taunted.

"And your form is beautiful," the man replied, preparing to fight again. "Maybe the most beautiful I've ever seen." Anastasia frowned, having an odd feeling he wasn't talking about her fighting form. "I'm guessing that you're an ODS." "

"What makes you say that?" Anastasia made a few strikes toward him but he blocked each of them.

"Only an ODS would risk being on one foot while attacking just to get the hit in. I could have knocked that foot out from under you easily but you risked it. I have to admire the willingness to take a risk." The man turned to attacking but Anastasia dodged his strikes. "I find sometimes the marines I see tend to cower when faced with Covenant, or odds they think they can't beat."

"Freezing up gets you killed. A real marine doesn't freeze; they fight whatever gets in their way to complete their mission." They were now trading strikes and blocks. "I'd have died a long time ago if I seized up every time I came face-to-face with Covenant."

"I'm honestly surprised how many seem eager to run away from danger, good thing I don't have to work with them." The man stepped back as Anastasia got close to hitting him in the face. "Hey, watch the nose."

"I'd try not to hit it, but it's hard not to strike such a large target," Anastasia teased. She ducked down as his fist passed over her head. "So if you don't work with marines who do you work with? ODS?" "

"Nope," he said casually as he blocked a left hook. "I don't have a team; it's just me, myself, and I."

Anastasia took a few steps back and looked at him, surprised. She was a bit jealous that he got to work all on his own. "Wait, you don't have a team? You can actually go out into the field on your own?" "

The man relaxed and dropped his fighting stance. "Yeah, I'm a singularly deployed soldier. I only fight on my own. Why, looking to ditch your own team?" "

"It's more like my team is dying to get away from me." Anastasia dropped her own stance and scowled, annoyed at him because he had the job she wanted. She liked the wolves she'd gotten to know, but death was always around her, and it hurt more when they were teammates you

cared about. "How does someone get a solo assignment?"

"Well you don't really get to choose it," he said as he moved off the mat and over to a bench where a water bottle was sitting. "I was just sort of given it, not really something that I went looking for. I don't know why they gave it to me."

"Shit," Anastasia muttered, disappointed that he had no more information. She liked being a Wolf, but at times she thought of how nice it would be to be alone, without a team and without the emotional weight of knowing people. Anastasia sat down on the bench to rest. She hadn't realized that she was breathing heavier and it irritated her that the man wasn't breathing too hard.

The man took a swig of the water as he sat down beside her. "My name's Rory by the way." He held out the bottle to Anastasia and she took it. "Not often I meet someone that can get a hit in on me. What's your name?"

"Lance Corporal Novara," Anastasia answered, handing the bottle back. "You left a spot wide open, knowing I would try to hit it. You kept yourself too well guarded for the rest of that sparring match. You had to have left it open on purpose."

"A fighter and perceptive, you've got it all." Rory smiled at her as he set his water bottle to the side. "I did leave it open, but not everyone would take advantage of it because of the risk. So tell me, Novara, where did you get such a scar?" He motioned to her shoulder where the scar from a Jackal was visible, hidden only by the strap of her tank top.

Anastasia's hand moved to her shoulder, trying to block the scar from his sight. "It was just a Jackal," she answered, turning her gaze to the ground. Even so many years later she could still feel the fangs in her skin, the Jackal's grip on her that she thought would never let go.

"I would think your armor would protect from a wound like that. How'd a Jackal do that to a woman like you?" Anastasia wasn't sure what to make of Rory's question. What was a woman like her?

"I wasn't in armor. It was nineteen years ago, and they don't really pass out armor to kids." Anastasia closed her eyes, trying to will away those memories. Like always thinking about that time brought up feelings of anger and helplessness - and she hated that. Most people felt fear or sadness when thinking about an event like the day her planet burned, but that wasn't Anastasia. Anastasia responded to those painful memories and emotions with violence.

"You were on your planet when it was glassed?" There was an edge of surprise to Rory's voice that was unfamiliar to Anastasia. Usually people had a sort of sad or pitying tone when they learned that information, but Rory seemed excited. "The people I was trained with all had seen their planets glassed too, but I haven't met anyone that wasn't trained with me that was on their planet when they were attacked. I haven't been in the field that long, but a lot of the soldiers I've encountered seem to have only heard about planets being glassed."

"Well now you have," Anastasia stated, a bit confused by how excited

he was. "I met plenty of people who watched their planet be invaded while I was living on Reach with the other refugees. I've only been in the field for about a year, but most people I've met usually think they're protecting their planet from the Covenant or were already in the military before they got the news about their planet."

Rory leaned a bit closer to her and he got a serious look on his face. "What planet were you from? Was the Jackal the first Covenant you had contact with?"

"Why do you care about any of that?" Anastasia snapped. "You lived through it, why would you ever want to talk about any of that? You know what it was like." Anastasia clenched her fists and leaned toward him, furious. "Why are you asking me this?"

Rory backed up a bit and frowned. "I'm sorry, I didn't think of it that way. You don't have to answer any of those questions if you don't want to; I guess I just thought you became a soldier for the same reason as me." Rory wrung his hands, obviously a bit awkward in the situation. "I mean, that you became a soldier for revenge—didn't you?"

"No," Anastasia answered, scowling at the idea. It had never crossed her mind to become a soldier to get back at the Covenant for the destruction of her planet. "I was only three when it happened, so it's not like the planet meant much to me. I became a soldier because the UNSC was the only thing I believed in."

Rory leaned back in a bit closer to her, tilting his head to the side just a bit. "You were only three? Even I wasn't that young when my planet was glassed. How did you make it out of that alive?"

Anastasia's hand moved up to her shoulder and the UNSC logo that was tattooed there. "An ODS saved me at the last minute. They got me off the planet and to safety." She could still remember the face of the man as he smiled at her in the medical bed.

"I'm surprised you have a UNSC eagle, not like a flaming skull or something." Rory leaned back to get a good look at the tattoo. "Why did you get a UNSC logo? Seems sort of bland."

"I don't know you well enough to tell you the story behind it. I don't know you well enough to tell you the reason behind any of my tattoos." Anastasia shifted a bit, trying to get away from his gaze as it made her feel a bit uncomfortable.

"You have other tattoos?" Rory raised an eyebrow and smirked at her. "Where else do you have tattoos? Can I see any of them?" His eyes dropped, looking over her exposed skin for any hint of a tattoo.

"You wish," Anastasia smiled slightly, happier with teasing than with asking about her history. And a part of her actually enjoyed his apparent interest in her, as each of her new scars made her more self-conscious.

"Well, it was a pleasure to meet you, Novara," Rory smiled as he stood up, grabbing his water bottle. "Unfortunately I have to get cleaned up so I can keep an appointment. I do hope to see you

again."

Anastasia knew that he really meant it, and she couldn't help but smile. "It's Anastasia."

Rory's smile widened at her words. "Well then, I hope to see you again, Anastasia." He saluted her quickly and then turned and moved to the showers.

Anastasia had never expected to see him after that, so when she met him again three years later it was a surprise. It was even more of a surprise that their second meeting would have such an impact on her, and would set the groundwork that would make her welcome his affection.

As with most of their missions, the planet they'd been deployed to had gone to hell. Their drop had been fine, but nothing good had happened from there on out. One of her teammates had been taken out by a Jackal sniper, a second had been obliterated by a hunter pair, and a third had been seriously injured. The fourth member of her squad had decided to stay behind with the third, but not long after they were lost after a Phantom had come crashing down on top of their position and collapsed the building they had been in. The last had been taken out by a fuel rod wielding Grunt, and even years later Anastasia would wonder how she didn't get killed in the blast as well. She was burned slightly by the heat, but somehow she survived.

Anastasia lay on the ground, her right arm was partially burned and her head hurt from hitting the ground when she'd fallen. Her helmet had protected her well enough, but it was still a shock to the system. She lifted her head and saw the Grunts waddle away, having thought she was dead. Before they could ready their fuel rods again, both of the short alien's heads suddenly burst into bits of skull and brain.

Anastasia rolled onto her side and quickly moved behind a section of broken building for cover. Her head was clearing but she didn't know who had killed the Grunts. She set her head against the rubble and gave herself a moment to breathe. She cursed as she realized that she'd dropped her weapon when she'd been knocked down, which meant that she was unarmed. Anastasia moved to the edge of the wall she was behind and peeked out to see if there were any enemies that would prevent her from getting her gun back.

What she saw wasn't something she was expecting, and for a moment she wondered if she was seeing a new Covenant that she hadn't been told about. Upon closer examination of the shape and the way it moved however, she had to conclude that it was indeed a human. The individual was gathering up ammunition from the Grunts, and was wearing armor that was absolutely foreign to her. It was bulky and rough looking, like someone had taken parts of a ship and strapped them to a person. The figure looked around and then turned toward Anastasia. She moved back behind the stone barrier and hoped that whatever it was hadn't seen her. Human or not, she still had no idea if this stranger was a friend or a foe. She heard steps and knew that the thing was coming toward her.

Anastasia made a quick decision and hoped that she'd at least have a chance to get away if she couldn't damage it. Anastasia crouched down

and looked around, spotting her assault rifle lying on the ground. She sprinted toward it and picked it up as she dove, rolling to her feet. Anastasia lifted the rifle but stopped as she saw that the figure was holding up its hands. Anastasia lowered the weapon and the strange armored person approached her.

"Are you injured, trooper?" a man's voice asked, as the figure held out his hand to help her up. Anastasia frowned at his hand and stood up on her own. The oddly-armored man retracted his hand and nodded, accepting that she was all right. "Where's your team, soldier?"

"Most are dead, I believe there are two of them still alive in the homes around the business district." Anastasia looked toward the field where the Covenant had been. There had been a couple Elites and a few Grunts, but they were all dead now. She looked over to the dead body of her teammate, deciding that there was nothing to be done. She moved over to the body and yanked off the woman's dog tags. Anastasia tucked them away in her armor and checked her weapon.

"What's your next action?" the strange soldier asked. He was scanning the street for any sign of Covenant. "What's your objective?"

"I don't have an objective. My radio isn't working and we were looking for a ride off-planet, or to a major troop location at least." Anastasia took some assault rifle ammunition that seemed usable from her fallen teammate as well.

The man watched her, as though he didn't believe her. "Have you not checked in with command for new orders?"

Anastasia looked up at the soldier and stood up. "Why don't you just go on with our own mission? I can take care of myself." Anastasia moved into a vacant building nearby, moving up to the second floor to get a bit of safety so she could check out her armor. She was aggravated to hear the strange soldier was following her up the stairs. Anastasia took a seat on a broken desk.

The other soldier looked around and seemed to decide that there was nowhere that could handle the obvious weight of his armor so he just leaned against a wall. Anastasia ignored him and just focused on her own armor. She checked her COMM system but she got nothing. She smacked her hand to the side of her helmet but it still didn't work. She finally pulled her helmet off and whacked it against the desk she was sitting on.

The armored man stood from where he was leaning and took a step toward Anastasia. "I thought it was you," he said quietly.

Anastasia frowned and narrowed her gaze at him, not understanding what he meant. "You must have me confused with someone else. Everyone I've ever known is dead, and those that aren't should stay far away from me."

"I know it's been a few years, Anastasia, but I didn't think it would make you hostile toward me." The soldier reached up and removed his helmet. Anastasia didn't know what she had expected, but the blue eyed, big-nosed man she'd met three years ago wasn't on her list of who she would have guessed. "Unless you're still annoyed that I asked about the glassing of your planet, that is."

Anastasia turned her helmet over in her hand, staring down at the visor and her reflection. "I never said it was because I hated them. Though for most of them it is because I hate them." She rubbed her thumb over a blood stain on the reflective surface, trying to clean it a bit. "I don't care about the glassing of my planet. You know it doesn't matter to me, Rory."

"You said it wasn't why you became a soldier," Rory corrected. "That doesn't mean it isn't important to you." He took another step forward and Anastasia reflexively looked up at him. He stopped in his tracks and she saw a sort of sad look on his face. "The years have changed you." It was a clear statement and Anastasia wasn't about to fight it.

"Combat, war, and death changed me," she corrected. "It could have all happened in one year and the results would still be the same." She met his gaze and stared him down as though it were a test of strength. "At least I'm not the one who's wearing old warthog parts on me as armor."

Rory looked down at the green plating of his armor. "I guess it does sort of look like that," he admitted. "It's actually pretty advanced armor. It increases my physical abilities, so I'm more than happy to look like a warthog." He smiled slightly and moved to lean against the desk she was on. "Do you think if I put some flashlights on the sides of my head that maybe Grunts will mistake me for one and dive out of the way when I charge them?" Anastasia sighed at the joke and Rory's smile fell. "Come on, not even a little smile?"

"What exactly do I have to smile about?" Anastasia asked. "I've got a busted radio, an injured comrade, a mostly dead team, and the only other useful member of my team is keeping the injured one alive. What exactly about all of that should I be smiling about?"

Rory watched her with a worried gaze as she glared at him. "I'm sorry, Anastasia, I didn't realize it was that bad." He crossed his arms a bit uncomfortably across his chest. The bulk of the armor kept him from really having a normal posture or position. It all just looked awkward and Anastasia couldn't understand why he'd want armor like that. "You know there's a police station a few blocks north that might have a pelican you can take to evac your team."

"Where do you think we were heading when those Covenant ambushed us?" Anastasia snapped. "I was just making a trip down to the grocery store to buy some milk."

Rory frowned, visually displeased. "The years have made you a rather harsh person," he commented and he leaned in a bit closer. "They've also made you a sadder one."

"I'm not sad," Anastasia denied. "I'm pissed that you won't just get on with your own mission and leave me alone. I can get a pelican on my own."

"You are sad," Rory insisted. "You said that only two members of your team were alive and that most of them were dead. A squad like yours has about six people. Half your squad is dead, so sad is a reasonable emotion."

"Losing half my team is called 'a Tuesday', Rory." Anastasia turned her gaze to the ground. It wasn't completely true; she had lost one named wolf, and now Sky was the only remaining Wolf that had a proper name.

Rory didn't respond to the question, just shifted his helmet in his hands for a few seconds. "I could help you get that pelican," he offered. "Your teammate's dead, so I can back you up."

"I don't need back up," Anastasia snapped. "Don't you have some mission you need to complete?"

"I'm supposed to help the troops that are already on the ground. You're a trooper on the ground. Helping you is a part of my mission." Anastasia scowled at him, insulted by the idea that she'd need help. Rory must have picked up on her displeasure. "Well, really I'm helping your teammates. If one of them is injured, then every minute counts. I should at least be able to help you shave off a minute or two from your retrieval time."

Anastasia sighed and decided that it was pointless to fight him, that he wasn't going to let her go on her own. "Fine, tag along if you want." Anastasia slipped on her helmet and checked the systems were fine. "Though I hope that stupid-ass armor can do stealth, 'cause you can find someone else to help if Grunts are going to hear your footsteps a mile away."

"I assure you that though this armor may be big, I can still do stealth," Rory answered. "It's more useful than it looks. Besides, we can't all look as good as you do in our armor." Anastasia looked away from him, trying to show that she was disregarding his comment. "You look better in your armor than I expected."

"Can you not flirt with me and instead get moving so that my teammates don't die before I get a pelican?" Anastasia stood up and moved toward the stairs.

"I'm not flirting," Rory corrected as he followed her out of the building. "I'm just saying that it looks good on you."

"How exactly is that not flirting? Complementing a woman's appearance is classic flirting." Anastasia moved out the front door of the building and looked around the street. "We need a ride."

"I'm not flirting," Rory defended. "I just think that the armor looks like you, you know, like it suits you." He audibly sighed and moved to stand beside her. "I think I saw one that was operational a few blocks away that we could get to easily." Anastasia motioned for him to lead the way and Rory started walking.

They walked in silence for some time, which Anastasia was grateful for as she didn't want him to pry more. The warthog that they found was in fairly good shape and once Rory pushed a chunk of metal off the hood it was good to move. She wouldn't admit it but his strength was impressive, and she envied how easily he moved the heavy, chunky-looking armor. Anastasia took the gunner's spot while Rory moved into the driver's seat.

They didn't find many enemies on the road, which was lucky as Anastasia didn't know how good of a driver Rory was and she didn't

want to find out with her life on the line. She was just happy as long as Rory didn't start asking her any more questions.

"So how have you been over the years?" he asked as he took a turn and maneuvered between the crashed cars on the road.

Anastasia let out an exasperated sigh, but for whatever reason she decided to answer. "I've been fighting a war, how do you think I've been," Anastasia grumbled. "You still living the sweet life where you get to work alone?"

"Yeah, still on my own," Rory answered. "Do you really still hate being a part of a team? I would think it would be helpful to have others for your enemies to shoot at, at the very least."

Anastasia looked down a side alley as they passed, checking to see if she saw any enemies in the distance. There was nothing so she relaxed a bit. "If anything I want to be solo now more than ever before."

Rory didn't say anything to that, just continued to drive down the streets. Anastasia was fine with the silence, but there was something in the air that made her uneasy. She looked down to him and something seemed to have changed about his posture. He seemed tense and more focused when he spoke and it startled Anastasia a bit. "Do you really lose that many teammates?"

"More than you know," Anastasia answered. "Most of them don't even live long enough to become 'Rookies', let alone get a real name. The newbie that was injured will probably be dead, but at least Sky should be able to survive."

"What do you mean by 'a real name'? Are their original names not good enough?" Rory asked.

"Combat gives you a name," Anastasia explained, spinning the turret around to watch their back and so she could lean against the frame-bars of the warthog. "It's a real name, not one that's handed to you, but earned. Everyone gets a name, but only Wolves have real names."

How exactly does combat give you a name?" Rory turned the warthog onto the main street and the police station came into view.

"You have to do something to earn it. Sky got her name when she fell onto an Elite and crushed its spine. She came from the sky and saved Luna's life. Of course Luna was dead a few hours later because of a Hunter, but the action still resulted in a name." Anastasia stared at the road behind them as she remembered the mission, the death of the rookie and the hot pocket before the large alien had taken Luna. "It's a name that's earnedâ€¦" she muttered.

"What's your real name?" Anastasia ignored the question, just turned the turret around as they neared the station. Rory brought the jeep to a stop and Anastasia jumped off the back. "How do you fight?" Rory asked.

"Fine," Anastasia answered curtly.

"I meant do you prefer being in close, or at a distance? I already

know you can hold your own in a fight. Just need to know if I should give you a pistol or if you're fine with your assault rifle." Rory pulled out his pistol and looked to the police station, scanning it for signs of Covenant.

"I'm fine with an assault rifle. A marine can use any weapon in a time of need." Anastasia pulled her rifle from the back of her armor and moved toward the station. The glass of the front door was busted, so she crouched down and just passed through. She'd stepped into the lobby and scanned the area to be sure it was clear. She spun around as there was a creaking sound behind her. She stopped as she saw Rory pushing the door to the station open. "I thought we were going for stealth."

"I can't fit through that opening," Rory argued. "Would you rather I'd broken one of the windows to get in?" He moved in to stand beside her. "The pelican will probably be a few levels up. I'll check the computer to see what I can find."

Anastasia nodded and moved to a side of the lobby, reading the signs that directed people to whatever department they were looking for, but there wasn't one for a pelican. There was a sudden roar, and Anastasia turned around in time to see an Elite slamming Rory's helmet into one of the computers. The alien tried to hold his head down but Rory rotated and his elbow knocked the Elite's arm away. It didn't stop the alien from striking with his other hand which wrapped around Rory's neck. Anastasia drew her knife and moved forward. The enemy was too focused on the male soldier that it didn't even react until it was too late. Anastasia climbed onto the Elite's back and stabbed her knife into its spine. She dropped down to the ground and Rory pushed the body off of him.

"Making a ton of noise and needing to be rescued. Remind me again how it is that you're helping me?" Anastasia taunted.

"I didn't even hear it come up and it wasn't on my motion tracker," Rory complained. "I appreciate you saving my skin, but I could have handled it."

"Sure you could have. And I'm sure you also got us a map." Rory looked away and Anastasia sighed. "Let's just start walking up the stairs and we'll see if they have markers."

"Fine, if you want to do it the simple way, but you seem to be into things being more difficult," Rory muttered.

"What the Hell is that supposed to mean?" Anastasia snapped. "I haven't been difficult at all, you're the one that's being difficult, forcing me to take you on this mission with me."

"You're the one that right away was hostile, that fought me when I just wanted to help, and keeps information from me," Rory argued. "I'm not an enemy, I just care about you."

"I don't need you to care about me, Rory. I'm fine the way I am and you're better off not caring about me at all. I'm part of a suicide squad, so it's kind of pointless to worry."

"I'm not worried about you dying," Rory corrected. "The Anastasia I met only three years ago smiled, and when she was teased it was

really playful and she flirted with me. She didn't have such a bleak outlook at life."

"Why don't you just mind your own business and just focus on the mission," Anastasia snapped, stomping up the stairs. Rory groaned and just fell into step behind her.

The two made their way up four flights of stairs before they found a sign that marked the fifth level as the flight station. It was clear of enemies, but Anastasia wasn't really surprised, the Covenant rarely cared about the levels of buildings above the first one. There were two pelicans and Anastasia realized that this is where she would have to split from Rory. Although she wanted him to get away before being around her got him killed, she didn't really want him to go either. It had been nice having him around, and he seemed to actually care about her.

"Well, there goes my plan to lie and say that I'd need your pelican so I'd be able to keep you safe." Rory laughed lightly, but Anastasia was fairly sure he wasn't kidding.

"I don't need to be protected," Anastasia said on reflex. She hated being protected, it got good people killed and it was always her fault.

"Why do I care about what you need? It's what I want to do." Rory reached up and pulled his helmet off. "Can I ask you something first?" Anastasia shrugged but nodded, deciding one last question couldn't hurt...though as usual, she was wrong. "How do you do it? How do you watch people die and get past it?"

Anastasia sighed and looked away from him. "I just shut out people from getting close. The people that get the closest to me are the Wolves with names, but I still keep myself distanced from them. People die, Rory, so you either stay away from them or you deal with the pain that comes with that death." Anastasia stared at the pelican and fell silent for a few seconds. "I choose to stay away."

"But aren't our bonds with other humans what make us human?" It was a stupid question in Anastasia's opinion, but Rory sounded serious. "I see soldiers dying all the time, and I want to help them but there's nothing I can do. All I can do is watch them die and I hate it."

"That's because you're soft," Anastasia huffed, setting her hands on her hips. "If you let the death of random soldiers get under your skin, then it won't be the Covenant that kills you - it'll be your own damn sentimentality. They're soldiers, dying is just one possible end for us, weren't you taught that?"

"Of course I was, but it's not that simple. I want to protect people, not just leave them to die." Rory ran a hand over his recently buzzed hair. "I'm just tired of all the death."

"Then you're in the wrong line of work. This war isn't over and there's going to be plenty more death before it is." Anastasia removed her own helmet and frowned at Rory. "It's going to hurt either way."

"So you just cut yourself off from having bonds with anyone? No

friends, family, or significant other?" Rory took a step closer to Anastasia and flexed the hand that was closest to her.

"The closest things I have to friends are my teammates, and they die too easily so I don't let them get too close. Family isn't something that I'm interested in, and I don't have anyone to love so I'm fine there. I'm not missing out on much," Anastasia concluded.

"You could really live a life with no love in it?" Rory seemed to not be able to comprehend the idea. "How can you be happy that way?"

"I don't need another person to be happy," Anastasia answered. "I have Covenant to kill, and drops to make. I'm happy that way. How could it be better?"

Rory smiled slightly. "You could let someone in. Someone that can handle themselves in combat." Rory's hand moved just a bit and brushed against Anastasia's hand. She looked down to his hand and didn't know how to respond. She didn't even understand what it was he was offering her. When Anastasia didn't respond Rory seemed to back off a bit. "Well, I guess we should part ways."

Anastasia nodded, agreeing that if she stayed any longer and she might start to over think his words. "I'll tell my team that a guy wearing a junk yard got his head smashed into a terminal to try to help them."

"I didn't do it for them," Rory said with a smile before he bumped his shoulder against hers. "You deserve to keep at least a couple teammates every once in a while."

Anastasia smiled slightly and she put her rifle on her back. "It's a new concept, but I think I'll give it a try." She slammed her fist into his shoulder, even though she was sure he wouldn't really feel it through the think plates. "See you around, Rory."

"You mean you actually wouldn't be against seeing me again?" Anastasia rolled her eyes and Rory laughed. "I think that's my biggest victory of the day."

"Only because you don't have any other victory." Anastasia smirked in triumph as she got in one last jab. Rory smiled back, and for a moment Anastasia thought that he was going to do something, but he just nodded and slipped his helmet on. Anastasia slipped on her own helmet and moved her pelican. She watched out of the front window as Rory's pelican rose and she followed suit. He moved off to the north and Anastasia turned to the south to pick up her team.

Anastasia had been a fool, stupid enough to believe his claims that he could take care of himself in combat. She tossed the tablet onto her bed and cursed under her breath. She cursed Noble Team, which he was listed as being part of. He'd been fine on his own, but the moment he'd been put on a team he'd been killed.

Anastasia moved to the bathroom and looked in the mirror, frustrated by the lonely gaze that stared back at her. She'd been stupid to get attached to him so quickly, and actually expect him to survive. Anastasia's fist slammed into the mirror and it cracked. She knew she would get shit about that later but she didn't care right now. She stared down at the broken shards of glass before she reached down and

picked up a piece.

She gripped the shard loosely and held out her right arm. There were lines of scars all along her inner forearm. To the casual glance they would look like just normal scars, but if someone really thought about it they would realize their placement was wrong. Her armor had always protected that part of her body so there was no reason for her to have scars there. Anastasia drug the shard across her skin, watching the blood rise up and slide down her arm. There were a few marks that were still healing, having finally reached a point where they would scar. She dropped the piece of the mirror into the sink and just watched her arm bleed. It would stop on its own; she'd done this enough times that she knew what she was doing. She knew when she could tell if it would scar or not. She knew how deep she had to cut and how deep was too deep. The cut was a bit longer than the others, her own way of honoring Rory.

After the blood had stopped flowing from the wound, Anastasia sat down on her bed and she ran her finger along her arm. "Damn you, Rory," she said quietly, as she allowed tears to slide freely down her face.

9. Survivor

Survivor

Anastasia sat in the overly cushioned chair, feeling uncomfortable, the exact opposite of how the chair was supposed to make her feel. She didn't like how small the room was and it made her feel trapped, though that seemed appropriate. She wasn't here by choice really, she'd been ordered here because of a recent incident, one she didn't really want to talk about. Anastasia looked to the man sitting in the chair across from her. She didn't know this man but she hated him, she hated all of them. None of them ever understood, they just heard words and nodded their heads, writing notes about things they couldn't fathom. This man would be just the same, tell her the same things and just sit there and judge her, like always.

"So then, Spartan Novara, how are you today?" The man asked.

"I'm stuck in a room talking to a shrink, how do you think I'm doing?" Anastasia shot back. She wanted to be training with Crimson or reading, not sitting in a room with some guy that thought he understood her head just because he'd been to some collage classes. To her anyone that had gotten a degree when the war should have been their main focus pissed her off, thus the psychiatrist pissed her off by existing.

The man smiled and it only ticked Anastasia off more. "Do you know why you're here today?"

"I broke a guy's nose," Anastasia answered, crossing her arms. "Just get to the part where you ask me what happened so we can get this over with." The psychiatrist nodded and Anastasia summarized the events. "Crimson, Shadow, and Majestic went to the training deck to play a new game type that one of the techs made. I figured it would be like Grifball or Ricochet, but it wasn't. We spawned with shotguns and pistols, and then the enemies arrived. That dumbass tech had the idea to make the enemies look like these freak infected humans,

Flood. I panicked a bit and was taken out quickly. When I respawned I was one if those infected forms. Roland realized I was having a panic attack and removed me from the game. When the others came to help me I broke a guy's nose."

"And why did you have a panic attack because of the simulated Flood?" The doctor asked.

"Not for a reason you'd understand. If you have to ask you've obviously never been around the Flood. It consumes everything, takes over the bodies of the dead and the living, making them enemies. My team was on the ground in Africa near the crashed cruiser that was infected." Anastasia felt her skin crawl at the memory. She could still remember the sound of infection forms moving over the ground and the heavy steps of tanks as they approached. She felt a spike of panic, like if she turned around the wall would be covered in Flood growth.

"Why don't you tell me about what happened in Africa?" It was where all these sessions went, straight to that day and all those memories Anastasia hated so much.

She sighed, knowing he wouldn't accept no as an answer and eventually she'd have to tell the story. She just wanted this to all be over as soon as possible so she just gave in. "We were in Africa, I don't care to remember the name of the city or the facilities we were checking. There were Covenant reinforcements that were heading to the city and we were beating them back. By the time they retreated Glass and Volt were injured, fighting on pure will power."

Volt Wolf winced as Timber patched up the cut on his leg. "Stupid pigeons and their damn rave weapons." Volt refused to call any alien by a proper name, or ever address the weapons correctly. Timber only shook his head and Anastasia knew that he was smiling, he always was. Volt was a seasoned soldier who hardly ever smiled, always quickly to lash out at people who annoyed him though it hardly ever had much of a bite. Timber was different in every way. He was young, just about Anastasia's age but only a year and a half younger, and he seemed to always smile, even in the darkest of times. It went well with his boyish look that, Anastasia wasn't afraid to admit, made him look kind of cute.

"Just be glad it wasn't a Brute? Better a cut leg than a crushed one," Mud reasoned. He sat on a truck that had been tipped on its side, looking down at the others. The man smiled, showing the crooked teeth in his mouth. Anastasia still wasn't sure if they'd named him Mud because he was ugly as mud or because of a mission where he'd inventively used mud as camouflage. The man looked up to Anastasia and Snow, their current team leader. "Any new orders, Boss?"

Snow basically ignored her soldiers, as she seemed to always do. She gave orders to Anastasia and she had to relay them to the rest of the team. Despite all efforts Snow seemed to have placed Anastasia in a second-in-command position. There wasn't any real authority, just the job of being an in-between, so Anastasia didn't fight it. "When there are orders you'll get them," Anastasia responded.

Anastasia was standing on the broken remains of a wall beside their Sargent as she stared through a pair of binoculars. "Slip space rupture," Snow muttered. Anastasia turned her gaze to the sky where a

Covenant cruiser had appeared in the sky and was falling toward Earth. It looked to be on fire but even from here Anastasia could see that there was something weird about it. "Get down!" Snow shouted as she lowered her binoculars. Anastasia dropped down to the pavement below and moved over to take cover behind the fallen truck. Timber pulled Volt and Glass behind the vehicle with a bit of help from Snow. Heat washed over them as the ship crashed into the ground, shaking the earth below them.

Anastasia waited a few heartbeats before she moved, standing up and examine the area around them. The ship had hit hard, parts flying far and wide across the city. Anastasia looked to a new hole in the side of a building, the dust still settling and smoke rising. "Damn my ears," Mud complained loudly.

"You should have been wearing your helmet," Glass scolded. The man gripped his bandaged arm as he moved to stand. Mud grumbled but slid his helmet on. Snow moved a bit closer to the smoking building, looking over the scene. Anastasia looked around them, feeling an odd, nervous feeling, like something was watching them.

"We need to make contact with HQ, get new orders," Snow decided. Anastasia nodded, acknowledging the instructions.

"There's a small outpost just a bit south of us that should have working equipment." Anastasia pulled her assault rifle from her back. "We can get there in a quarter hour dragging those two." She motioned to Glass and Volt.

"Get them on their feet, we're moving out." Snow turned away and moved over to Mud, grabbing his arm and forcing him to his feet. Timber slung Volt's arm over his shoulder to support him and the group moved out.

Snow took point with Timber and Volt in the middle, the others arranged to the sides and Anastasia bringing up the rear. The air seemed to be thick with smoke and choking, though Anastasia was aware her suit kept her air clean. They moved down the roads, weaving between cars and checking allies for enemies. They had made it almost a block when something moved. Anastasia watched from the back of the group as a figure walked toward her team. It looked human but there was a large sickly growth on the man's left shoulder and his left arm was mutated into a grotesque clawed arm. Snow shouted for the man to stop but something primal had kicked in in Anastasia's system and she felt a rush of adrenaline. Her grip tightened on her weapon and the world around her changed, her senses stretching to their max with the arrival of a threat. The figure ahead of them started to run and the air filled with gunfire. The enemy fell and the only sound that could be heard was the fires in the city still consuming whatever fuel they could.

There was a thump behind Anastasia and she turned to see a monstrosity behind her. Maybe at one time it had been an elite but now it was a mutated creature, made of the same puce flesh as the growth on the man but it was almost completely covered with one great arm, pulled back and ready to strike. Anastasia looked the creature over but she couldn't figure out where to aim as it didn't seem to have any sort of head. The thing struck forward and Anastasia moved her gun to block. The force sent the weapon flying from her hand and Anastasia colliding with Glass. Her teammate cried out in pain as he

landed in his injured arm while the others opened fire. Anastasia moved her body over the injured soldier keeping Glass down on the ground and away from accidentally getting hit by a stray shot.

When the shooting stopped Anastasia looked back and saw the monster dead on the ground. "There are more of them. Move it!" Snow shouted. Anastasia could see that there were at least half a dozen similarly mutated creatures heading toward them at a fairly fast rate. Anastasia scrambled to her feet, yanking Glass to his feet. She didn't even check to see if he was running, just took off down the street. She could hear the creatures behind them and from the growing sound they were not only growing closer but growing in numbers. A window broke to her right and Anastasia looked over just as the sharp spikes of one of the monster's arms pierced through Mud's chest. There was something different this time, a small shape moved up on thin legs, climbing over the monstrosity and to Mud like a skittering spider. The smaller alien life form looked like a small balloon, two antenna sticking out topped by tufts of red. The balloon thing moved to Mud's neck and he screamed as it seemed to attack him. Snow and Timber fired, killing the form that had busted through the window but it was too late. Mud's body started to shake and twitch and the puce flesh that covered the other enemies started to grow along his back and legs, quickly spreading. The balloon form had buried itself into his shoulder so only the antenna were still visible. Mud, or what was once Mud, took a step back, pulling itself free of the dead form.

Mud swung at Timber but Volt suddenly pushed him out of the way. The still mutating arm of their former teammate slammed into the incurred marine and sent Volt crashing into the side of a car. Mud moved toward him and Anastasia charged toward it, drawing her knife. She still didn't know where to aim so she just stabbed her knife into the place she'd seen the balloon go. Her blade found its mark between the two antenna, stabbing at the area over and over until the mutated body fell to the ground. Anastasia moved over to Volt, pressing two fingers to his throat, searching for a pulse. She found none. A hand tugged on her arm and she looked up to see Timber trying to pull her up, Glass and Snow already running.

Anastasia forced herself to her feet and followed after them, Timber beside her. The remaining soldiers made a dash for it; though with the things following them Anastasia was starting to doubt that getting to a radio was their biggest concern. Snow suddenly turned to move down another street and Anastasia realized why as she could see the collection of Warthogs parked, or crashed, at the corner ahead. Snow reached it first and slid into the driver's seat, trying to get the jeep to start. A great mass of the alien flesh moved forward and it took Anastasia a second to make heads or tails of what she was seeing. The puce figure was a hulk of flesh, though it almost seemed impossible that it could even stand. Its legs were thick like tree trunks, its arm and torso large and bulky, and its waist seemed to be a trip of thin lines that were only inches around. The great figure moved toward the Warthog and Glass shouted a warning to Snow but it was too late. The large creature swung one of its massive arms, bringing it down on the hood of the jeep, causing its back wheels to rise up off the ground before the second arm struck like a bat, sending the car flying. The Warthog slammed into the side of a building, the twisted, smoking wreckage falling to the road.

The large creature moved forward, moving to the fallen Warthog.

Anastasia checked their system but could see that there were no bio-signs of Snow and it was almost impossible for her to have survived inside the ruined Warthog. She noticed the monstrosity moving, not directly to the wreckage but moving out of the way to avoid a fire as it advanced. Anastasia snapped into action, knowing that once it was sure Snow was dead the thing would come after them. She grabbed a grenade from Glass' belt, pulled the pin, and threw it. The grenade landed near the nearly destroyed Warthog and blew, causing fire to wash over the large figure. It flailed as the sickly flesh went up in flames.

"What do we do?" Timber asked. Anastasia looked to him and realized he was asking her. A quick glance at Glass told her he was also looking to her for answers. Anastasia cursed Snow at that moment for dying, for leaving her with the soldier who were looking to her for answers. She wasn't supposed to be leading them, ever, but here they were waiting for her to give orders, a concept that seemed crazier than asking her to sprout wings and fly.

Anastasia looked around and realized there were more of the combat forms heading toward them, like every dead body had stood up and became these monstrosities. "Warthog," Anastasia snapped her gaze to the remaining Warthog that the large form hadn't bothered with. "Glass, see if it's still working." Anastasia wanted him out of the way. If they were going to have to fend off any enemies a wounded soldier was only going to get in the way. Anastasia motioned to Timber to follow as they moved around to the back of the Warthog. Anastasia pulled off one of the cans of gas from the rear bumper and handed it to Timber. "Make a line across the road." Timber nodded and moved away to do as instructed. There was a sound like a shot singing through the air and a dull thud from the front of the jeep. Anastasia moved up and could see Glass hanging over the side of the vehicle, what looked to be a yellowish needler round sticking out of the side of his helmet. Anastasia cursed and pulled him out of the vehicle. She moved into the driver's seat and tried several times before the warthog came to life and she felt like maybe they would catch a lucky break.

"Road covered," Timber announced as he moved back toward the vehicle. He'd made it almost all the way when Anastasia realized there was something behind him. The new form looked like a sack of flesh with just legs, stumbling toward her teammate. One of the combat forms left forward and knocked Timber's feet out from under him. Anastasia jumped out of the driver's seat and knelt down, grabbing the pistol from Glass, holster and opened fire on the combat form. The monster jerked back with each shot but didn't fall. Timber scrambled to his feet and ran toward the Warthog where Anastasia was standing. Anastasia moved to a nearby building and broke off a piece of burning wood from a chair and tossed it toward the gas tank Timber had dropped when he'd fallen. The gas lit up quickly and the fire spread back toward the creatures and the line that Timber had made in the road. The combat form was engulfed in flames, finally killing it. The bulbous form behind it fell to the ground and burst open. Anastasia turned away from the blast and felt something land on her back. A sharp needle stabbed into her shoulder and she realized what was happening. Just as the infection form had stabbed and buried itself into Mud now it was on her. Anastasia turned around and slammed her back into the side of the Warthog, causing her head to smack into the metal as well but there was a slight pop as the form was destroyed. Timber screamed beside her and Anastasia looked over to see one of

the infection forms latching onto her. She swung her arm and the balloon like parasite broke easily under the force. Timber had collapsed to the ground and didn't seem to be moving so Anastasia picked him up and set him in the passenger's seat before sliding into the driver's seat and taking off.

"I just drove as fast as I could out of the city," Anastasia explained. "We found a Pelican evacuating soldiers and caught a ride with them. Timber could barely move, just his arm a little and his head. On the ride back he stopped breathing but I knew CPR and kept him alive." Anastasia's gaze dropped to the floor. "The medics said he was mostly paralyzed, legs and right arm. We didn't find out until much later what we fought was called Flood."

"Have you seen Timber since that mission?" the Psychiatrist asked. Anastasia shook her head. "Why not?"

"I don't remember his name," Anastasia admitted. "His name is Timber Wolf but the UNSC doesn't know him by that name. As members of the Wolves our true names are those we earn. The UNSC may know me as Anastasia Novara but my name is Fire, and it always will be."

"What if I got his name for you? Would you be willing to visit him?"

"Would that make you happy?" Anastasia grumbled. "If it will get me certified as not crazy then I'll do it."

"I don't think you're crazy," the doctor assured her. "You were faced with a terrifying event in your life, with being infected by the Flood. Nothing crazy about that."

Anastasia scowled, knowing he was just trying to keep her calm. She wouldn't be here if he didn't think there was something wrong with her. "If you get his name I'll go." The doctor smiled and Anastasia fought the urge to smack him.

Anastasia stood in the doorway, watching the man sitting at the window. She'd already been standing there for several minutes and she didn't want to move. She couldn't run, that wasn't a choice for her. If she moved she had to move forward. She took a deep breath and moved into the room, pulling up a chair beside her former teammate. He didn't look at her, didn't say anything, just stared out the window. Anastasia didn't expect a reaction; she knew she'd never get one. She had gone to visit the man after the attack of the Flood and he had just sat and stared, no reaction to the world around him. Still she hadn't lied to the doctor. This man beside her might bare Timber's original name but it wasn't him. Timber was dead, only his body seemed to live on like the walking dead they'd seen on that mission, only missing the ugly growths.

Anastasia looked to the man beside her, not really having a name for him. The plaque outside his door said Barry Barton but there was obviously no one home. His gaze was unfocused, his face slack without emotion, and his body was thin, unused. He was like a stuffed wolf: made to look alive but the life was gone from him, and it wasn't coming back. The caring energy of the man was gone and Anastasia almost missed it. "Timber?" She almost hoped for some sort of response, anything, but there was nothing. "I should have let you die on that Pelican." She meant those words more than anything. He was

the reason why she wasn't suited to be a leader, she couldn't handle being responsible for the lives of others. Because of her mistake this ghost sat in the world of the living, just waiting until even medical science couldn't keep it alive.

Anastasia stood, no longer able to stand sitting there with him. She knelt down, pressing a light kiss to his cheek like a family member saying their final farewell to a loved one. He was the last person in the galaxy that knew her name, her true name, and he'd never say it again. "Goodbye, Timber." She left the room without another word. This had changed nothing, hadn't helped at all. She still had the same fear of the Flood, still felt the guilt for Timber's fate, and was still the lone wolf left of her pack. Still, she'd done as she'd been instructed and the nurses would verify she'd been there. As long as they cleared her that was all that mattered, as long as she got back to the fight.

10. Confiding

Confiding

John moved through his living room, running a rag over the coffee table to clean it of dust. The house was so quiet when Sam was at school, and Kelly was gone, so it felt so much bigger and hollow. He moved into the kitchen and grabbed the datapad that was sitting on the table. He then went back to the living room, intent on writing up a letter to Kelly; as he often did to relieve the lonely feeling he got at times like these. He had written over two dozen, but had never sent any of them. He didn't want to make Kelly feel any worse about the time she spent away from her family. He was just about to sit down when there was a knock at the door.

John hesitated, not sure who would be visiting in the middle of the day. He moved to the door and was surprised that when it opened he found Anastasia standing on the other side. She was wearing a simple green t-shirt with the Spartan eagle in a darker green on the front, and a pair of khakis. John stepped to the side to allow her in. She moved into the house without a word, which was how her visits usually started.

She still wasn't very comfortable in John's home, but she seemed to be relaxing easier and more quickly with each visit. He always let her start the conversation; it allowed her to have some security if she felt like she was in control. "Kelly isn't here," she said simply.

It hadn't really been a question, but John treated it as one. "No, she's not. She's on an assignment right now, and Sam is at school." John moved to stand beside her. "Do you want something to drink?" Anastasia only nodded in response. John motioned to couch before he moved to the kitchen and grabbed a pair of cups. He filled one with water and retrieved a carton from the refrigerator. After he'd poured the milk he put the carton away and went back out to the living room. John passed Anastasia the glass of milk and sat down beside her. "How are you?" John asked as she sipped at the milk. John had found it amusing that his sister's drink of choice was milk, and had even managed to get a picture of her drinking milk with Sam - though he'd never tell her that picture existed.

"I'm alive, and I have no new major injuries, so I'd say I'm doing fairly well." Anastasia brushed off the question as John had expected. "So, Kelly's busy. How's Sam?"

"He's doing really well," John answered. Sam was one subject that he loved to talk about and one that Anastasia seemed interested in. "He's excelling in his studies and is easily at the top of his class. His teachers told me a few weeks ago that he'd started a gang, but when I asked him about it he said he was building a team. What the teacher left out is that his team patrols the playground and protects kids from being bullied." John smiled proudly, happy with his son showing such leadership and nobility so early in life.

"So Sam made his own little troop of Avengers?" John seemed confused by her question. "Do you know what the Avengers are?" John shook his head. "Justice League? Teen Titans? The X-Men?" John shook his head to each. "Wow, you've never read a comic book. I had a friend that used to read them when we were teens." Anastasia's features grew sad and her gaze turned to the floor. John was concerned, worried that there was something he should be doing to comfort her but he was failing. "The point is, they're a group of superheroes that work together."

John nodded but didn't really address it, more focused on his sister. She seemed uneasy about something, but he didn't know how to approach the subject. "How is Crimson?" It seemed like a good way to lead in to asking about more serious subjects.

"Well we haven't lost anyone, so I would say that's fairly good," Anastasia answered. "I suppose I'm getting along fine with them." She was being evasive, more than usual, and John didn't like it. They'd made so much progress lately and he hated to think that all of that was gone. "I haven't injured any other Spartans recently either."

John was glad to hear that, as he knew she could have arguments with other Spartans and at least she wasn't getting herself in trouble. "Then why are you visiting?" They both knew Anastasia usually visited when her teammates were annoying her, or when she wanted to get away from Spartan-IVs in general.

"I can't just come visit my brother? I thought you said that I could stop by any time." Anastasia looked to him and John frowned at her. "Okay, so I'm not just here for conversation." Anastasia pulled out a small tacpad. "The Psychiatrist wants me to open up, so I promised I'd find someone to talk to. I just need your thumb print and for you to sign here and he'll leave me alone about it."

"You're seeing the Psychiatrist again?" John asked. That was troubling news. Anastasia hadn't had any problems that required her to see a doctor for a while, and she'd seemed to be doing better. "What happened?"

"Nothing, it was just one of those standard checkups. I was reluctant to talk to him and he made some claim that I was being argumentative. Sure, I called therapy a stupid thing that doesn't work, but in the end he said that if I wouldn't trust him I had to find someone else to trust. Just sign the thing."

John scowled but didn't move to take the tacpad. "Ana, I'm not going

to just sign it; that would be a lie. Maybe you should find someone to open up to. I can see it when you visit, the way you seem jealous of Sam when you come over." Those words seemed to really activate her. "If you'll at least tell me why you seem jealous of my son, then I'll sign it."

Anastasia crossed her arms, slouched, and looked away from him. John just sat in silence, considering it a victory that she hadn't just got up and left. Anastasia sighed and finally spoke. "Of course I'm jealous of Sam. He has a happy home life and a loving mother and father." Anastasia sighed and slumped against the couch. "I'm jealous that he has the childhood I wish I had. Now will you sign it?" John took the tacpad and signed it before handing it back. "You have to give your thumb print too," she reminded him.

"The deal was only for my signature," John pointed out. Anastasia groaned, realizing that he was going to try to get more information from her. He didn't like having to force her hand, but he thought it would be healthy for her to get things off her chest. "Come on, Ana, it's not that big of a request."

"That's easy for you to say, but you have no idea. You probably don't really want to know any of the things I would tell you. You have a happy life, John. There's no reason to weigh it down with any of my issues." Anastasia let out a long breath and ran a hand through her hair. "I don't even know what I'd tell you." John didn't know how to reply. He didn't know what he'd want to know that wouldn't be asking too much. "When I was twelve I tried to kill myself," Anastasia blurted out. John was stunned by the information, or rather the admission. He had come to suspect that the scars on her wrists were from an attempted suicide, but she'd never admitted it. Anastasia's gaze was glued to the floor and he knew she wasn't about to look at him after her statement.

John pressed his finger to the tacpad and it registered his print. He handed it back and Anastasia took it without a word. John moved without thinking, and his hand gently pulled her head toward him and he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I'm glad you don't feel that way anymore, Ana." She didn't react to his words, just stared down at the carpet. John realized that she had tensed up and he was struck by a possibility that he hadn't considered before. "You don't feel like that; do you Ana?" Still she didn't respond to his question and he was starting to feel worried. "Anastasia," he said a bit louder. Anastasia finally turned to him but there was some emotion on her face he wasn't able to identify. "Ana, tell me you don't feel that way anymore."

Anastasia seemed to ignore the question. "Why did you do that?" John furrowed his brow, not sure what she was referring to. "Why did you kiss my head?"

"Oh," John hadn't realized he'd even done the action. "It's just a habit I apparently have developed. Kelly says I do it when I'm feeling protective. I kiss Kelly on the head before she leaves on deployment, and Sam every night when he goes to sleep. I don't know when it started, but Kelly has commented on it before."

"I don't want, or need, your protection. In my experience the people who protect me end up dead." Anastasia scooted away from him on the couch, seeking more distance between them.

"Anastasia, what I want to protect you from can't kill me. In fact I can't really do anything to protect you from it anyway, because it's all memories and thoughts in your head. I wish I could help you deal with them, but I know that I can't. However, that doesn't mean I can't want to protect you." He hesitated for a moment. "Ana, tell me you don't feel that way." He couldn't shake that fear and he hadn't gotten any reassurance.

"Don't feel what way?" Anastasia asked.

"Like you want to die," John clarified. "That you don't feel the way you did when you hurt yourself." John reached over and placed his hand on the back of her wrist. "Ana, tell me you want to live."

Anastasia signed and pulled her hand away from his. "I'm not proud of having done it. I was twelve. I couldn't sleep at night because of dreams about the Covenant, my days were filled with just as much fear, and I felt hopeless. I don't feel that way anymore. I'm a Spartan. I kill Covenant not fear them, and I'll be damned if I ever fear a man like my father again." Anastasia's voice had become hard and John could tell that she was angry.

"I'm glad to hear that," John said, smiling slightly. He felt at least a little relief to hear that she wasn't in the same mindset as so long ago. He was still concerned by the fact that she had feared her father, but John wasn't going to press the matter. She'd already opened up more to him than ever before and he wanted to encourage that. Trying to force more information would do the opposite. "You would have only been, what, three when your planet was glassed?" Anastasia nodded but her hands clenched. "That would be a harsh memory, and you've had to deal with it for all these years. You are certainly a strong woman to have survived."

Anastasia shook her head and looked across the room at the wall. "I was almost eaten by a Jackal. If it weren't for the ODS that saved me, I would have been killed." She turned and pushed up her sleeve to show him the tattoo on her shoulder of the classic UNSC logo. "That day I realized that my father was wrong, the UNSC really did want to protect us."

"I always preferred the old logo," John commented as he examined the tattoo. "The UNSC is meant to protect people, and now it's your family."

"And it cares about me a lot more than my real family ever did." Anastasia paused for a moment, fingers running over the symbol on her shoulder. She then turned her hand over to look at the scar. "It wasn't until it all became too much that I realized how much of an ass he was. He didn't care if I lived or died, he only cared about his own ambitions. I realized that what he was trying to drill into my head was wrong. That's when I knew I was going to be a soldier." She turned to look at him and then suddenly turned away. "I think I've said enough." She stood up suddenly and John did as well. "I should go before I say something else," she muttered. She rubbed a bit at her temple. "I don't want to go back. They'll ask questions and I'll hit someone. Then they'll send me back to the shrink and I'll have to tell them that they're idiots and that it's all their fault. Then, to cover their asses, they'll call me crazy and I'll be

tossed out of the Spartans."

"Then don't go, Ana. Stay here and tell me how you're doing in the War Games, or we'll swap war stories. I bet you have a few good ones." John smiled at his sister. "You haven't told me anything about what you did before you became a Spartan." John sat back down on the couch and motioned to the space beside him. "Come one, Ana, tell me something I don't know."

~*~*~

John sat sideways on the couch, sipping at his water. Anastasia was sitting beside him, staring down at the glass of milk in her hands. She had just told him the story of how Star Wolf had died, just another in a long line of stories she'd been telling. John counted fifteen former teammate whose deaths she'd told him about so far. "At Reach the Hot Pockets they gave us got their names, thenâ€¦then Earth happened." She fell silent for several seconds. "I don't know if I'm ready to talk about that."

They'd been talking for hours, and John had learned a bit more about how to recognize when to let things go. He wasn't going to force her to tell the story of what happened on Earth. He didn't want to think about that part of his life anyways. "I don't know if anyone is ready to talk about Earth."

"We weren't that far away, you know." Anastasia looked up and John raised an eyebrow. "I mean when the Flood came you were right there, so was I." John clenched his fists at the thought of the Flood. "But we didn't do as much good as you did."

"You survived, that's as good as you can do against the Flood," John assured her. "You seem to really like the Wolves from how you talk about them. Why become a Spartan?"

Anastasia slouched a bit. "The Flood killed the Wolves. When it was over I was the only Wolf standing. So I became a Spartan, and that was the end of the Wolves. They never started the team back up, and even if they did they wouldn't be Wolves like we were Wolves." Anastasia pulled her feet up onto the couch. She'd made herself comfortable, taking off her shoes and seeming to relax.

"You miss the Wolves." John didn't need to ask, he knew. Anastasia nodded her head but didn't say anything. "I don't know what it's like to lose people like that, one-by-one. The augmentations took half the Spartans in one go, a few died throughout the war, and then Reach took most of the rest. My family went from seventy five to three, but there'd never been time to mourn."

"Seems the most important part of that family survived. Kelly made it out of it alive, and you got Sam," Anastasia pointed out. She set the remainder of her milk on the table. "At least you have some of your family left."

"You have Crimson now," John pointed out. "So maybe one day they could be like the Wolves to you."

Anastasia shook her head quickly. "No, they aren't like the Wolves. They're a team, but no team will ever be like the Wolves." John watched as she rubbed absently at the scars along her forearm.

"They're nowhere near the same sort of team as the Wolves. They never will be," Anastasia said forcefully.

John put up his hand. "If you say so. You know them and I don't. And I didn't know the Wolves either, so I couldn't say anyone was like anyone else. I just mean they are still sort of a family." Anastasia glared and John shrugged. "Fine, they aren't a family."

"If they are a family, they're only slightly better than the one I grew up with." John smiled a bit at Anastasia's words. "What?"

"You said 'the family you grew up with.' So you like the family you have now?" John was hopefully about her answer. It meant a lot to him that she liked being family with him, even if he didn't know why he cared.

"My current family isn't that bad," Anastasia admitted. "Best I've had so far." John smiled wide enough for her to easily identify it, though he had noticed she'd become better at reading him. "Don't be so proud of yourself, it's not like you have stiff competition. You're up against a team I feel useless in, a team where everyone kept dying, and—" Anastasia trailed off and looked away from him.

"I get what you mean, Ana. It's fine." John knew she meant her father, who he was beginning to think she was never going to tell him about the man. He would just have to accept that and move on. It was enough to have her as family.

"No, you don't," Anastasia argued. "I just—you got lucky and didn't have to be a part of that family. You're better off not knowing, but anything I say may give something away." John didn't say anything, knowing that times like this Anastasia had to work things out herself. "I guess I should just tell you. You'll make whatever judgments or assumptions you want no matter what." John kept himself absolutely still, as though the slightest movement would send the house of cards falling to the ground and he'd never find out. "I hate my father because when I was a kid he would beat me, and he tormented me mentally." Anastasia was staring intently at the ground as she spoke, avoiding John's gaze.

John sat in silence, processing the information. He sorted through the emotions the information brought up. He felt anger that anyone would hurt any child, let alone his sister. John felt protective, like he wanted to shield Anastasia from whatever pain was, is, or might be caused in relation to those experience. "How long?" He hoped she'd say only a couple years, but from her hunched posture and the fact that she'd curled up a bit more was a sign that wasn't likely to be the case.

"Until I was eighteen," Anastasia answered. "He wanted me to be his perfect obedient soldier, so he'd hit me when I didn't do what he wanted, made me feel worthless, and—I don't know how to explain it." The female Spartan frowned, brow furrowing as she tried to find words. "He even killed my pet rabbit," she finally said.

John slipped his arm around his sister and pulled her a bit closer. "I'm sorry, Ana. You shouldn't have had to go through that, no one should." John felt a bit guilty. If he hadn't been a Spartan he could have been there, could have protected her from all of it.

Anastasia shook her head and pushed his arm off. "Don't be sorry, I don't want pity. Sure, I hate him for who he was, what he did, but it doesn't hurt any more. The thing is, the messed up kid that I was, I never would have dreamed of the life I've had. And the truth is it's partially because I was such a messed up kid. The training he gave me probably made it easier for me to become an ODST, and he gave me a clear understanding of who the rebels were, and that their sad stories didn't mean that they were really oppressed good guys." Anastasia set her forearms on her knees. "Most of what's broken about me these days is because of my time as an ODST, or the Flood."

"You're not broken, Ana. Being injured isn't broken," John corrected. "Injuries can heal, with a little help and some time, you just have to give it a chance."

"Yeah, keep thinking that; but remember that some injuries never stop hurting, or don't heal properly. If you don't set a bone right it can make an arm useless," Anastasia pointed out. "But I appreciate the sentiment." John smiled and he put his arm back around her shoulder, but she didn't push it away this time. Anastasia instead leaned against John's side, relaxing a bit.

They sat in silence for some time until the front door opened and Sam walked into the room. His backpack was slung over his shoulder and he stopped as he stared at John and Anastasia on the couch. "Hi Dad," he greeted with a smile. "I'm thirsty," he then added.

"OK, Sammy. I'll get you some water," John said, starting to stand up.

"No wait, I can get it," Sam said quickly, turning and running toward the kitchen.

John sighed and sat back down beside Anastasia. "He's growing up so fast, and doing more things for himself. He needs me less and less every day."

"And Kelly's not usually home to need you, though I guess when she's injured she does," Anastasia added. There was some clattering in the kitchen and John started to stand up. Anastasia put an arm out and he stopped. "You trust him, let him try." John sighed and sat back down. "When I was a kid if I dropped a glass and broke it, dad would get upset. It was something he'd hit me for, punish me for a small mistake. You're not like him, you don't rush in the moment you hear a glass fall. You let him have a chance to pick the glass up, get his water, and you trust him."

John signed and nodded, knowing that she was right. "I just want to help him. I know he can do it, but a part of me misses the days he needed me to get his water for him." John heard the water running and then stop, and he held his breath until Sam walked out of the kitchen. They watched as his son moved across the room, down the hallway, and they heard his door shut. "I just didn't expect him to grow up so fast."

"He's the child of two Spartans, he's not going to grow up like a normal kid," Anastasia reasoned. John wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing, but he supposed he couldn't help it. "You need to worry

less."

"Worry less? How can I worry less?" John frowned at his sister. "I have a wife still on active combat duty, a son who wants to do everything for himself and might get hurt, and you're out there with Crimson and come by only when you need to get psychologists off your back. How can I not worry?"

"Because you're supposed to trust us," Anastasia answered. "Kelly is a skilled Spartan that can handle herself, Sam is a capable kid, and I have Crimson, even if I hate having to be around them. Besides, don't you like me coming around?"

"Of course I do, I just wish you'd come to visit just to visit." John liked his sister's visits, but sometimes he wished she'd come just because she wanted to see him. "I care about you, so I'm going to worry. That's part of being human. Wouldn't you worry if I was still in combat?"

Anastasia huffed before she answered. "You've destroyed Halos, the Flood, the Ark, and a Forerunner. Why would I worry?" John felt like he should be hurt or offended, but with his record most people seemed to think him invincible. He had sort of assumed that Anastasia, having actually spent time around him, would have come to realize that it wasn't true. "You really need to relax."

"It's hard to go from being the leader of the Spartans, to sitting at home while my wife and sister run into combat." John scowled, really not liking how this conversation had changed to being about him. But he supposed he owed it to Anastasia to open up as she had for him. "I stepped down from a combat role to ensure that they couldn't use Kelly and I both not being home as a reason to keep Sam from usâ€¦but I still miss it sometimes."

"You shouldn't, it's still hard work, still dangerous, and there's very little stability. Here you have a home, a family, and you get what a lot of people can only hope for. You have peace." Anastasia looked around the room, a yearning look on her face. "Those things are lost to some of us."

John hated to hear his sister talk like that, with no hope of one day having a peaceful life. He remembered a time when he thought his only family would be the Spartans, and that they'd be at war forever. "Those aren't lost to you, Ana. You have a family here, a home, and you are safe and can be peaceful here. You haven't lost any of it."

"You don't understand," Anastasia contradicted. "I mean a family like you have. The only men I've ever even started to have feelings for have either stabbed me in the back or died. And I wouldn't trust myself with a kid, I'd just end up a screwed up parent. I'll never have a house of my own that I visit every day. Not that I'd want one - it would be just a big empty space to remind me I'm alone. As for peace, it doesn't suit me. It would be like wearing a wool sweater against your skin. It's itchy and uncomfortable, not something I want." Anastasia sat up a little bit and she seemed to be thinking about something. "There may be something you can help me not loose, though."

"Anything," John said, eager to help his sister however he

could.

"My name," she said simply. "I'm the only one that knows it, and I feel like it's slipping away because I don't even call myself by it."

"Ana, no one's trying to take your name." John didn't quite understand what she meant. They all knew her name, so how was she losing it?

"Not Anastasia, that's the crap name that my father gave me. I mean my real name, the name I earned, that the drop pod gave me." John raised an eyebrow but waited for her to explain. "The Wolves had real names, true names, ones that you were given by combat. Sky, Stone, Gray, they were all names given because of combat. The Wolves are gone now, so I'm the only one that remembers their real names, as well as my own real name."

John nodded, understanding now what she meant and why it was important. The Wolves had been her team, the closest thing to a good family for years and she'd watched them die one at a time. Any traditions or beliefs they'd had would be precious to her, particularly as she was the only one to carry them on. "If you tell it to me, Ana, I swear to call you by it all the time so you'll never lose it, ever."

"Not always," Anastasia said, shaking her head a bit. "Only when we're with the family, and only if they promise not to say it around people that aren't part of the family. No one but my pack can know my name."

"Are you going to tell Crimson?" John asked.

Anastasia snorted. "They aren't my pack," she answered. "Now promise you won't say it outside of the pack."

"I promise not to say your true name to anyone or around anyone outside the pack." John placed a hand on his heart and sat up a bit taller so she knew he was being serious."

"Okay," Anastasia said, appeased by his promise. "My real name was given to me on our first real mission out. My pod malfunctioned, went up in flames, and hit the planet hard." John was surprised by the information. A malfunctioning pod for an ODST meant certain death. "I was hurt, I couldn't get out uninjured, but I was alive. After that my team gave me the name Fire because I defied my burning pod, because the fire couldn't kill me," Fire explained. "I am Fire Wolf."

John smiled and placed an arm around his sister's shoulder. "Thank you, Fire, for allowing me to keep this precious thing alive."

"You're a good guy, Lucky, so I know I can trust you." John raised one eyebrow slightly and Fire smiled. "As a Wolf I have a right to inform people of their true names. I think all the suicidal things you've done and falling from a Dreadnaught to Earth awards you Wolf status. That, and being part of my pack."

"So I'm Lucky Wolf?" Fire nodded and John chuckled. "The Spartans

always did say I was lucky. I think it's perfect."

"Doesn't matter what you think of it. Mud Wolf didn't like his name, but combat chooses it for you and you've got to live with it." Anastasia smirked and leaned a bit toward John's side and his comfort. "It's getting late," she remarked.

John glanced toward a clock and realized he should have been working on dinner. "I am way off schedule," John muttered.

"I didn't mean to get in the way of your day," Fire said, frowning a bit. "I'll get out of your hair and let you make dinner."

"You could stay for dinner," John pointed out. Fire smiled slightly but shook her head. John decided not to push it, knowing she was set on leaving and that he wouldn't be able to stop her. "Can I at least get a hug?" It was another habit that Kelly had pointed out to him. He hugged Sam every day when he went to school and would hug Kelly until she had to force him to let her go before deployments. He'd started the habit as well when Fire would leave. She sighed and reluctantly nodded. John wrapped his arms around his sister and hugged her, glad to feel her return the hug. "I'm glad you opened up, Fire. I really appreciate it." John loosened his grip on Fire but was surprised when she didn't.

"Thanks for listening," Fire said over his shoulder. She released him and John let his own grip loosen. "I'll visit again, John. And not because it's mandated by a medical professional."

John grinned and led Fire to the door. "Maybe next time you'll stay for dinner. Sam would love to have you around."

"We'll see," Fire said, with a very slight smile. "See you later, brother." John watched his sister walk out the door. John shut the front door and moved toward the kitchen, feeling rather good. It was the most productive visit he'd ever had with Fire, and it was a good sign that she would continue to open up to him.

11. History

History

Anastasia stared out at the view of Earth, though she really wasn't focused on it. She'd snuck off to this room to get away from her team. They'd proven to be reasonably skilled and competent as teammates, but they were a bit too chatty for her liking. So she'd crept out when no one would notice just to get a moment to catch her breath and enjoy the quiet. The missions on Requiem had been hard, and rather irritating. She had no trouble when pitted against rebels, and the Covenant had always been simple, but Prometheans were a pain to fight. They were always teleporting away right when she was about to land the final blow or just lumbering around the battlefield without any real logic. It was nice to have a break from combating such a bothersome enemy.

The doors to the room slid open but Anastasia kept her gaze fixed on the planet, hoping the visitor would be quiet - or better yet just walk away. The doors slid shut and to Anastasia's annoyance the footsteps of the other person indicated they were approaching her.

They stopped beside her and she heard them sit down on the seat, and she felt the cushions of the couch shift with the added weight. Still she hoped that they'd at least leave her in peace. If only she were so lucky.

"Hey, Anastasia," the man said, causing her to look over at him. She didn't recognize the man, but somehow he knew who she was. His hair was freshly cut, his features relaxed, and his eyes were watching her carefully. He had a scar that ran from his left cheek, across his nose, to his brow and he clearly had the build of a marine. "Good to see you again."

"Do I know you?" Anastasia asked bluntly. The man smiled and she frowned, not liking that he seemed to know something she didn't. "Who are you?"

"It's the scar," he said, scratching at his cheek slightly as he said it. "I suppose I'm not as handsome as I was when we were young, but some ladies like the scars." Anastasia held her silence, waiting for him to give her an actual answer. He finally sighed and his smile fell a bit. "Ted."

The name brought back memories that Anastasia hadn't thought about in years, and she hadn't thought she'd ever think about again. "Did the Covenant give you that or your dad?" she asked dryly.

"Kig-Yar," Ted answered, shaking his head slightly. "Took my helmet off to eat a bit of nutrient bar and we came across a patrol and I got scratched. Suppose that's why they tell you to keep your helmets on." He chuckled lightly but Anastasia didn't see the humor.

"Why are you here, Ted?" Anastasia asked, not understanding why he seemed to have come looking for her. "What do you want?"

"To thank you for pulling me and my team out of the fire on Requiem. I mean, you threw us into more fire with that Litch." Ted set his arm on the armrest and tapped his fingers against the couch absently.

"We were following orders," Anastasia informed him, turning her gaze back to the planet below. "It suited us to have passengers at the time."

"Well then lucky me," Ted said, shifting a bit on the couch in what seemed to Anastasia to be a nervous action.

"What do you really want?" Anastasia snapped, turning back to him and frowning. "I'm not in the mood for beating around the bush."

Ted smiled and let out a long breath. "You never did like dallying," he stated, turning to look out the window. "I'd be lying if I said that I only came here to thank you for saving me and my fireteam. I came to apologize."

"What do you have to apologize for?" Anastasia asked. "You didn't die, so it didn't reflect poorly on my record."

"I'm not apologizing for anything recent," Ted corrected. "I'm apologizing for the man that I used to be. The one that was a coward and put himself first. You trusted me back then, and I wasn't worthy

of that trust."

"I don't really care, Ted," Anastasia told him, shrugging slightly. "It doesn't matter to me." She crossed her arms over her chest and returned to viewing the scenery, hoping that would be the end of it.

"I don't really expect you to accept my apology, but I have to make it," Ted pressed on. "You have every right to be mad at me, I really deserve it, but I'm not the person I was then any more. I want you to know that. That...crappy guy you knew isn't the person I am now."

"I don't care," Anastasia asserted again. "I don't care about any of that, so you don't need to waste your time. I simply don't care about anything from back then."

"Really?" Ted asked, huffing in disbelief. "You were always so mad and bitter about all of it - and now you're telling me you're just over it? I find that a bit hard to believe."

"You don't have to believe, it's fact. All that stuff it's..." Anastasia searched for the right word. "Insignificant."

"You didn't think it was insignificant when we were teenagers," Ted pointed out. "So you aren't mad at your father anymore?"

"Of course I still hate him," Anastasia snapped, turning to scowl at the man beside her. "He's a rebel and the things he did were still wrong, but what he did doesn't rule my life. It may be part of why I became a soldier, but who I am today isn't because of it."

"All right, all right, I get it," Ted said, putting up a hand to ward off her anger. "I didn't think you'd forgive him, and I'd think something was wrong with you if you had. Though I guess in the end it worked out better for the both of us. I mean, we're Spartans, the protectors of humanity and the pride of the UNSC. Though I have you to thank for that, not my father."

"How is you being a Spartan my fault?" Anastasia asked, calming down a bit. The last time she'd seen Ted he'd had no intention of becoming a soldier.

"After you left, I took a good look at myself and I decided that I wasn't happy with the man I was. I left home, like you did, and I ended up a soldier. I ended up becoming an ODST, and even fought on the Ark with the Master Chief." Anastasia scowled at the mention of the Master Chief, but she said nothing. "I think the skill I showed with a rocket launcher while gunning with him is what got me into the Spartans." Ted smiled at her and seemed to ignore her annoyance. "So how'd you become a Spartan?"

"They were scraping the bottom of the barrel, and I used to be an ODST," Anastasia answered simply. "Well at least you aren't a rebel."

"Yeah, I remember how you'd always beat me on the range and during hunting trips. I wouldn't have wanted you to be my enemy." Ted laughed lightly and stared at her for a moment. "I owe a lot to you, Annie."

"Don't call me that, it's such a childish name," Anastasia scolded. "And you don't owe me anything. You left on your own, not because of me."

Ted smiled and shook his head as he stood up. "No, Annie, it was because of you. If you hadn't been brave enough to leave I never would have even considered it. If you hadn't left I would have been my father's puppet, but you showed me that I didn't have accept that life. I just wanted to let you know that I'm thankful for that." He stood there for a moment before he looked away. "Well, I guess I'll let you get back to...whatever you were doing. Thanks for the chat."

Anastasia watched him go, but then he stopped at the doorway and turned back. "Oh, and I know it's a little late...but Happy Birthday, Annie." He nodded and walked out the door, leaving Anastasia alone in the room. She looked back to the window and tried to focus on relaxing once more. It was a bit harder, though, with old memories suddenly at the forefront of her mind.

12. Support

Support

There was a tense quiet in the air as all eyes were focused on a single marine. Martin was mulling over his words but Anastasia, like very one else in the room, was intently waiting for him to continue. He took a deep breath and flexed his fingers, a nervous habit he'd had for years and usually exhibited when sharing. He was also shaking a little from what Anastasia could see, which was unnerving for her. Out of all of them Martin had been doing the best, so it made his current condition all the more worrisome.

"So I...I started cleaning the pistol. I cleaned every inch, did a super thorough job of it, and made sure I took my time." Martin paused for a moment before he managed to continue. "I was extra careful so that when I used it I would know it wouldn't fail me - but I think I was also giving myself time to think so when I pulled the trigger I'd be sure. I sat on the edge of the bed, closed my eyes, and put the gun to my head."

Anastasia was listening intently like a moviegoer at the climax of a film; but to her and the other soldiers in the room the story wasn't for entertainment, and the next part of the story was so very important., Their group leader, Matt, spoke next, asking the question on everyone's mind. "What made you decide not to pull the trigger?"

"D," Martin answered, referring to his girlfriend's nickname. "I'd waited until she'd gone to the store to do it...and either I took too long or she had to come back for something, I never asked which one, but there she was." Martin shook his head and smiled just a little. "I don't even care which one it was, because the moment I saw her in the bedroom doorway I knew I couldn't do it. I just sat there in disbelief, frozen. She came toward me, slowly as though if she moved too fast I'd panic and shoot. The moment her hands touched the magnum I released it and just hugged her. I don't know how long I cried for, and I'm not even sure why, but I did. She made me come today, and tell you all this. I didn't want to face any of you, not after I'd

done so well." Martin let his gaze drop to the floor, ashamed of himself.

"Well I'm sure everyone here is glad that she got you to come today," Matt said, leaning a bit toward Martin. "Have you changed anything recently? Anything in your routine."

"I stopped taking my anti-depressant," Martin answered. "I wasn't feeling depressed anymore and the headaches were getting to be annoying."

"We've talked about this before, Martin, you can't just stop those medications. You were feeling fine because you were on them. If the headaches were too much, make an appointment and a doctor can find you an alternative that might have milder side effects but still treat your injury." Matt's voice was calm as he spoke to the other man. "I want you to start taking your medication again and after a week call me or Doc, check in with us. I also want you to make an appointment with your regular doctor and see if he can switch you to another medication." Martin nodded and Matt leaned back. "Once you're back on your meds you'll realize that some headaches are better than a bullet."

"It doesn't feel like that," Martin countered.

"It will once you're back on your meds," Matt assured him. "Thank you for sharing with us Martin. I know that wasn't easy." Martin nodded and relaxed, knowing his turn was over. Everyone else tensed, knowing that it might be their turn next. Matt turned his gaze to Anastasia. "All right, Anastasia, do you have anything to share?" Anastasia just shrugged, trying to deflect the question. He'd have to try harder than that. When she'd first been diagnosed with PTSD, avoidance was part of what they'd talked to her about. She avoided talking about her trauma and that meant she would close up during group discussion unless pushed to do so. "I know you have something to talk to us about. The Doc and I are alerted every time you assault another soldier. So how about you tell us about what happened?"

Anastasia sighed, knowing that she would have to talk to them, even if she didn't want to. "He deserved it," she started, still trying to be cagey, but the constant gaze of Matt told her she'd have to give up more. "Fine," she relented. "My team, Crimson, had just finished a match against Echo Team, having beaten them. We were in the locker room having our armor removed after the game when one of the new fireteams came up and started trash-talking us. I already hated these people because, although they're officially called Hydra Team, the bastards have been calling themselves the Wolf Team." Anastasia scowled, putting the rest of the group on edge as they would know how that affected her, but Matt just watched her calmly. "Hydra is made up of three boots and only one Spartan that's been around for a little while," she explained. "So they're talking trash and I'm ignoring them - boots always think they're tough. So the one that's been around is joining in, playing the pal rather than the leader, but then he crossed the line. He directly insulted me, and I told him that he was just blowing hot air and that he'd shut up after he set foot in the sim with an actual human to fight. That's when he said it..." Anastasia turned her gaze to the floor but she really didn't want to continue.

"What did he say, Anastasia?" Matt pressed, trying to get the

information. She still refused to say anything, starting to clam up. "You need to talk to us," Matt said, trying to calm her.

Anastasia refused to raise her gaze, taking a deep breath as she tried to force herself to speak. "He said..." She again faltered, unable to get it out.

"Can you tell us what it is that he mentioned that set you off?" Matt asked, trying to ease her struggle.

"The Flood," Anastasia answered, at least able to get that much out. A few of the other soldiers shifted, uneasy at the mention of the alien parasite. For a few of them the Flood was the scourge of their trauma. She looked up and across the group at Matt. "He referred to a sort of freak out I had when my team and I participated in a simulation in which the enemies that died became infected." Matt nodded, indicating he remembered the incident. "When he said it I snapped and decked him. It wouldn't have been as bad if I hadn't still been in armor."

"How badly was he hurt?" Matt asked.

"It wasn't bad, he's augmented after all. It was basically just a bruise the shape of my fist." Anastasia slouched in her chair, remembering the trouble she'd gotten into afterwards. "He deserved it though, and should have known what was going to happen."

"Did you know what was going to happen?" Doc, the psychiatrist assigned to their group, asked.

Anastasia shook her head in response. "He said it, and I hit him. I didn't think about it - it just happened."

"Violent reactions to your trauma were decreasing impressively, Anastasia, I'm sad to see them return like that." Matt frowned and Anastasia knew he actually did feel sad. Matt actually cared about them, and had even gone to great lengths to remain as an advisor to this group even though he had his own struggles with getting benefits from the UNSC and at home. "Did something happen to rollback your progress?" Anastasia just shrugged again in reply.

"How's your former teammate from the Wolves?" Doc asked, as usual putting the pieces together, much to Anastasia's annoyance.

"He died," Anastasia answered bluntly. She crossed her arms over her chest and slouched slightly in her seat.

"How long ago did he pass?" Doc asked, watching Anastasia closely. Anastasia remained silent and just stared back at the doctor. "If you aren't going to tell me, then I'll just send in a request for the date of death and compare it to the date of that last incident; and then you'll only have to come into my office to talk about it."

It irritated Anastasia that he knew exactly how to push her buttons, and that he was more forceful about it than Matt. Still she'd rather just get it over with than have to make another trip to the shrinks. "I got the message that he was dying a short while before the simulation we ran, after which I socked the guy from Hydra."

"So then you were emotionally charged at the time. Why, after getting

that news, did you still participate in the simulation?"

"I don't see how it matters. He's been dead for years; the UNSC keeping him alive with machines doesn't change that. I don't see why I shouldn't do my job." Anastasia didn't see why the dead should stop the lives of the living.

"Your teammate's condition has always been a trigger, but this is a good thing," Doc said.

"How is it a good thing?" Anastasia asked. "I got scolded for it, so I don't see how any part of this situation is good."

"It means that the mention of the Flood wasn't the trigger, it was the message you got before the simulation. That means that your progress hasn't been inhibited, but rather that there was an unexpected trigger. As I've told you before, violent outbursts in response to things involving your trauma have been a long standing symptom of your condition. Did you visit him while he was dying?" Anastasia shook her head, tensing a bit at the suggestion. "That doesn't surprise, but do you intend to go to the funeral?" Anastasia again shook her head. "I'd like for you to at least try to attend."

"If you don't want to go alone, I'll go with you for support," Matt offered.

Anastasia sighed and nodded. "Fine, I'll go," she agreed.

"Excellent, then is there anything else that you want to share with the group?" Doc asked.

Anastasia paused for a moment, deciding if what was bugging her was worth bringing up. "Maybe," she said, though she wasn't convinced it was really something they needed to talk about. "I might have messed up during that second match."

"How so?" Matt inquired.

"We were part-way through the game, easily beating the other team, and I went down to the lower level of the map to pick up a needler. When I went down there to grab it, one of the newbies was there with the energy sword. He said some dumb line about 'not messing with a wolf' and it set me off. I forgot about the needler and charged the guy. I beat him of course, but what matters is what I said back to him. I may have said something about how a real wolf fights."

"And that was bad for what reason?" Matt asked.

"Because I was still on the team radio channel and all of Crimson heard me say it. Now they won't stop calling me 'Wolf'." Anastasia scowled and fidgeted slightly. "It's like constantly being reminded of the Wolves, and I don't like it. But I can't tell them that I don't because then they'll ask questions. They're those kinds of people."

"Does it bother you enough to think that it will cause you to lose any of the progress we've made?" Doc frowned and made a note.

"I don't know," Anastasia answered. "It's annoying, but it's better than answering questions about it."

"Isn't it a correct name?" Matt pointed out.

"They say it like it's my name, but it's not," Anastasia corrected.

"Isn't it like a last name?" Matt clarified. "A lot of soldiers refer to each other by their last name. So 'Wolf' would be the proper name to call you."

Anastasia paused for a moment and then shrugged. "I guess so, but I've always kept the Wolves separate from Crimson."

"It seems you might not be able to keep them completely separate. However Crimson doesn't know the whole truth behind the name, so to a degree it is still kept apart," Matt reasoned.

Anastasia shook her head, rejecting that logic. "But they don't say it like that, and it bothers me. They have no idea what they're really calling me or what it makes me think of when they call me it. They say it like it's just any old word without knowing what it means to me, and I sure as Hell am not going to share that with them."

"But if you're not willing to share with them then they'll never learn," Doc pointed out. "Can you consider telling them that it means more to you?"

"No," Anastasia responded forcefully. "I don't want them to ask questions."

"No one is saying you have to, it was only a suggestion," Matt clarified, trying to calm her down. "If it starts to aggravate you to a point you think you might snap, or it have any adverse side affects, then call Doc or I and we'll try to help you. But as long as it's not creating much of an issue then you can't really stop them." Anastasia nodded, accepting that she didn't have much of a choice. "Is there anything else you'd like to say?"

Anastasia considered if there was anything else, but the only thing that came to mind was her recent meeting with Ted and that had nothing to do with her PTSD. "Nothing else," she finally answered.

Matt examined her for a moment before he relaxed and smiled slightly. "Thank you for sharing with the group, Anastasia." He then turned his gaze to a man to Anastasia's right. "Anything you have for the group this week, Chester?"

Anastasia tuned out most of the next hour of their meeting until they were dismissed. She vaguely knew one of their members was going to be a father, another had lost her sister to injuries caused by a rebel attack, and the newest member had spent a good bit of time explaining what had happened to her - but most of that didn't matter to Anastasia. When the meeting was over she was one of the first out of the door, better to not be invited to any unwanted events.

"Hold up, Anastasia," Matt called out, causing her to stop. "Send me

the information about the funeral, and I'll be there."

"Sure," Anastasia agreed. "I need to get back to the barracks."

"I'll leave you to it," Matt said with a small nod. "Good night, Anastasia." Anastasia only nodded in return before she turned and walked toward the base, hoping her team wouldn't ask about where she'd been.

13. Funeral

Funeral

Anastasia's fists hit the punching bag in an uneven pattern, striking whenever it swung close enough. She focused fully on her target, blocking out the man that was talking to her. He'd been rambling about some sushi place for the last few minutes and she'd been trying her hardest to not hear a single word of it. He was just as persistent as ever, though now it didn't seem as endearing of an attribute. She took a step back and let the bag swing freely, shedding the momentum from her applied force. "No," she said as she turned and walked over to the weight rack she'd set her water bottle on.

"Come on, Annie, would it really be that bad? A meal and a little chat wouldn't kill you, would it?" Ted moved over to stand beside her, smiling in exactly the same way Anastasia remembered from when they were young. It made her want to slap him.

"I said no," Anastasia asserted before taking a swig from her water bottle. "Besides, I have plans." She grabbed her things and moved toward the locker room, annoyed to find that Ted was still following her.

"What plans could you possibly have that are better than having dinner with an old friend?" Ted asked as they reached her locker and Anastasia started to strip. She glanced toward him and noticed that he'd averted his gaze. After over a decade of military service such an act of modesty seemed alien to her, especially in the Spartan locker room. Anastasia ignored it though and changed into her dress uniform.

She finished dressing and grabbed her hat out of her locker, turning to Ted. He was now unabashedly looking her over, the reserve he'd shown a minute ago apparently gone. "That uniform suits you," Ted commented.

"Not as much as my old one," Anastasia informed him. She sometimes missed her Marine uniform, but it simply didn't fit her any more since the augmentations.

"Odd to have something suit us, or to belong." Ted turned away again, staring at a blank locker.

Anastasia didn't respond to his words. What he'd said was true however. It had been strange to have somewhere she belonged when she'd joined the military. Even at the worst of times, as a Wolf she'd felt like a part of the pack. That reminded her why she was in her

dress uniform, and she felt like something was hollow inside her; like a bottomless pit. She slammed her locker with more force than necessary, frustrated with the emotions she didn't want to face.

She turned to leave the locker room but stopped as she spotted a man in uniform watching her and Ted. His gaze was passive, taking in the scene and analyzing it all. It annoyed Anastasia that he was treating the situation like a threat that needed to be assessed. "I told you I was going to be there, Matt," Anastasia snapped, scowling at the man.

"You said that you'd try to be there," Matt corrected as he approached the two Spartan-IVs. He looked Ted over and frowned before turning back to Anastasia. "I came to be sure that you weren't late. We don't want to keep the pastor waiting."

"I gave you my word I was going to come. I don't need you to hold my hand," Anastasia asserted.

"Who exactly is this?" Ted asked, frowning at Matt.

"He's why we can't have dinner," Anastasia answered. "Let's just get this over with," she muttered before moving toward the exit, Matt walking beside her.

They had left the building and were walking across the base before Matt spoke. "So who was that guy? From his height I'd guess he's a Spartan too, but he seemed close to you."

"He's someone I used to know who won't get the picture that he's not a part of my life anymore." Anastasia was fine sharing her military issues with Matt, but Ted was a personal issue, and she didn't want to talk about him with anyone.

"He was someone who was asking you out to dinner," Matt pointed out. "Are you going to take him up on the offer?" Anastasia didn't answer the question, just stared forward as she walked. "I think you should."

"What would you know?" Anastasia grumbled.

"I know that a date is just a date. And if you don't like him then you don't have to go out with him ever again." Matt shrugged and clasped his hands behind his back. "I also know it's a free meal."

"The UNSC already supplies me with food," Anastasia pointed out. "And I already know I'm not interested in him."

"You call that stuff they serve in the mess hall food? Those augmentations remove your tastebuds, Trooper?" Matt smiled slightly but Anastasia didn't smile or laugh at the comment. She understood what he was doing, trying to put her at ease. But she was constantly aware of where they were going and it didn't make her feel like smiling.

They didn't speak again for the rest of the trip to the graveyard where the funeral was being held. They stood outside the gate for several minutes as Anastasia stared at the rows of white markers that showed the graves of hundreds of soldiers. Matt was far more patient

than she had expected, as she came to terms with the realization that somewhere there were graves with the wrong names for each of the former Wolves - the reality that one day there would be a stone with the wrong name for her. She couldn't really get past it, but she managed to set aside her unease. Once she'd settled some they walked across the grounds to where there was a small group gathered, but stopped when they were still some distance away.

The pastor was reading passages from a text that Anastasia didn't recognize. Then again she'd never been religious, and neither had any of her family, so for all she knew he was reading the most famous quote in the whole Bible. She wasn't really listening to the words anyway; her focus was on the marker that the people were gathered around. The name on it wasn't Timber, and there was something eating at the back of her mind as she read the name over and over.

"Don't," Matt whispered, catching Anastasia's attention. She turned to him, not understanding what he meant. "Don't run." Anastasia became aware that she'd been fidgeting and that there was a growing urge in her that she now realized was a need to run. She no longer wanted to be there, and would rather face a group activity with Crimson and have to take part. She felt like something was closing in around her - like a stealth Elite was breathing down her neck. "This is his funeral, the last place you can stand by your teammate and see him through to the end."

"His end was a long time ago," Anastasia growled out louder than she should have, fighting to keep herself calm enough to stay.

"Death isn't our end," Matt clarified. "We see our brothers to wherever they rest. Few soldiers get a chance to see their teammates to their grave, but you're one of them."

"I shouldn't be!" Anastasia shouted, not caring that it caused the gathered funeral attendants to turn to look at her. She hadn't meant to be so loud, but she didn't feel like she had any control at that moment. She was overwhelmed with emotions she couldn't begin to untangle and she was starting to panic. Her breathing became shallow and she started shaking. Things had rapidly gone south in a way she wasn't ready for.

Matt stayed at a careful distance but tried to talk to her, though the words didn't make sense to Anastasia. He redirected her and she was aware that they were moving away from the gravesite. It was taking what little control she still had to not turn the walk into a full sprint. They didn't stop until they were about two blocks away from the cemetery. Anastasia moved into an alley and leaned against a wall, taking deep breaths in an effort to calm down.

She wasn't sure how much longer it was when she finally managed to work through her panic and got her breathing back to normal. Matt stood a few feet away, watching her, and on occasion offering her reassurance. She stared at the ground, ashamed of how she'd had such a meltdown all because of a grave.

"I hadn't expected it to be that bad of a trigger," Matt admitted, taking a step toward her. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault I'm more fucked up than you thought," Anastasia responded, standing up from the wall. "You can tell the Doc that I'll

be by tomorrow. I know the drill when I have one of these things."

"You can talk to him tomorrow about what happened," Matt agreed. "But you made it there at all, Anastasia. You should be proud of that."

"Yeah, I'm real proud of shouting at a bunch of strangers at a funeral and needing to be escorted away because I was having a panic attack." She started to walk out of the alley and toward the base, looking for the security of familiar surroundings.

"I'm not going to give you a speech about recovery and how it's a long road. You've been on the road long enough, I'm sure you know it. I just hope that you won't keep anything from Doc." Matt moved to walk beside her, though keeping pace with a Spartan was not an easy task.

"I never keep things from him," Anastasia assured him. "He's the one person that seems to know when I'm not telling him something, so it's less annoying if I just say what's on my mind."

"He is a persistent one," Matt agreed with a chuckle. Anastasia shrugged but remained silent, not really sure what else to say.

They didn't speak again until they'd made it back to base. Matt decided to stay behind at the entrance to avoid having to go through security, and Anastasia parted ways with him. As soon as she set foot on the grounds she felt secure, surrounded by other soldiers and buildings she knew inside and out. She then headed toward the barracks, figuring she needed a little rest. She'd have a hard day tomorrow.

End
file.